

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

CULTURE CITY | By Pia Catton

A New Tune To Dance at 40



One of the great pleasures of watching dance is that choreographers—a music-addicted lot—can often introduce you to new musicians and genres of music. The Jazz Jamaica All-Stars, a group that melds jazz, reggae, ska and big band, are on my shelf (yes, in CD form, thank you very much) thanks to choreographer Garth Fagan, whose 2002 piece “Translation Transition” featured the band’s fantastic, multi-layered sound.

But the education is not only for audiences.

Dancer Norwood Pennewell has worked in Mr. Fagan’s company since 1978 and still, he says, this sort of discovery happens all the time. “Every year, it’s: ‘Where do you find this music?’” Mr. Pennewell said of Mr. Fagan. “It’s all over the map with him, from Arvo Part to Jazz Jamaica All-Stars. We are in a constant state of learning. He is a constant educator.”

And after 32 years, Mr. Pennewell has learned his lessons well. Now a senior dancer in the company, he also serves as rehearsal director and assistant to Mr. Fagan. But this season brings a milestone. Garth Fagan Dance, which is based in

Rochester, N.Y., is celebrating its 40th anniversary with a run at the Joyce Theater from Tuesday to Sunday, and the program will include a new work by Mr. Pennewell.

It’s a first for him and for the company, which typically dances the work of its founder. As with many modern-dance companies, Mr. Fagan is a tough act to follow because the act of creation is so deeply personal. As he describes his style of movement, “It’s modern dance, but it has the poly-rhythms of Africa. I love the speed and precision of ballet, but I don’t like the affectation.”

This year Mr. Fagan decided it was time to encourage his veteran dancer to take up choreography. “I’ve watched him teaching classes, and he comes up with these fabulous combinations. He has been dancing leads in all my pieces all these years,” Mr. Fagan said. “Why not give him a push?”

Dancers who have the choreographic bug will usually step forward when given the opportunity to create their own work. But Mr. Pennewell—who everyone calls “PJ” for “Pennewell, Junior”—was harboring no such ambitions: “Not one bit.”

After all, these men have been in the roles of choreogra-



Garth Fagan persuaded dancer Norwood Pennewell, right with Nicolette Depass, to choreograph a work for his company’s 40th anniversary.

pher and dancer, teacher and student, for more than 30 years. “Garth really does take care of his dancers,” Mr. Pennewell said. “He makes sure that we are educated in general—in every aspect of life. He keeps your mind, spirit, emotions and body always focused on getting better. You could spend 10, 11 years just learning movement or how to phrase your movement.”

Mr. Fagan confirms that he takes the long view. His choreography is based on a technique designed to keep dancers performing well into their adult years. And he has a bitersweet view of the moments

when dancers leave the company to fulfill their own life goals. “It’s a little painful to me that I have these men who last through the years and the women are not onstage. But they have these children who call me Grandpa Garth. It’s a fact of life.”

But the long view also includes the continued growth of his company. And as a look to the future, Mr. Fagan tapped Mr. Pennewell, who had to change his mindset in a hurry. “Initially, when this was really about to happen, I went through thoughts like: ‘What exactly am I going to say? How do I take the first step?’” he

recalled.

Both men describe the creative process as one of total artistic freedom, with the knowledge that Mr. Fagan could advise on technical issues such as getting dancers on and off stage effectively or placements that take advantage of lighting.

Mr. Pennewell’s resulting work, “Hylozoic,” includes almost the entire company and uses the music of Yusef Lateef, Adam Rudolph and John Adams.

Mr. Fagan’s own new work, “Thanks Forty,” is in keeping with his broad approach to music selection. It starts off

with Shostakovich cello concertos, followed later by a score that includes waterfalls, birds and melodic African drums. The four-section piece contrasts a portion for men (“I told them I want to see testosterone, but not macho,” said Mr. Fagan) and a section for female dancers: “They are doing to some hard dancing—weight shifts and dynamic changes. These women are not waiting for princes. If they want a prince, they will go get one.”

But it all ends up with a celebration—“a very complex party to celebrate the years,” as Mr. Fagan put it.