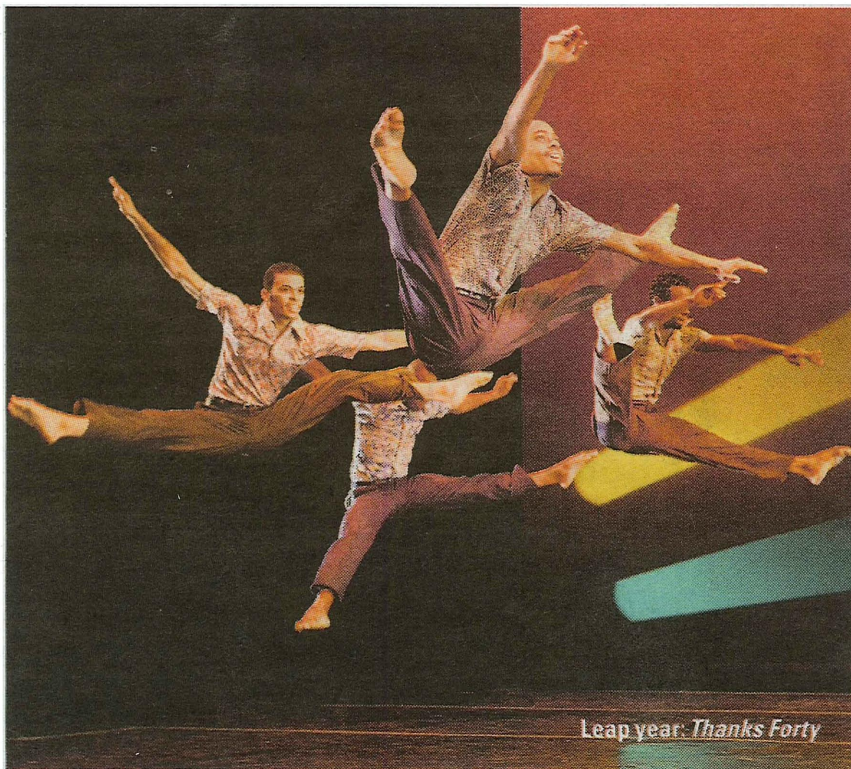


Dance



Leap year. *Thanks Forty*

Yi-Chun Wu

Garth Fagan Dance
Joyce Theater
November 9 through 14

The Company Man

Garth Fagan and his veteran dance troupe celebrate four decades

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

It's hard to believe that a scrappy ensemble named Bottom of the Bucket, But . . . Dance Theatre could thrive in Rochester, New York, and grow into Garth Fagan Dance, an internationally touring company now celebrating its 40th anniversary. Fagan made it happen—not just because of his authoritative choreographic voice, but through the phenomenal dancers he trains out there.

The Joyce performances unofficially honor the three senior Fagan dancers. Steve Humphrey, a founding member, is still contributing his vitality, power, and charm. Norwood Pennewell, who joined the company in 1978, is a master of those Fagan leaps that seem to float in midair and land on velvet and the sudden, unwavering balances on one leg that stop time. Nicolette Depass is a relative baby, joining Fagan Dance in 1994, and Fagan's unique style fits her like a silky gown (or a lioness's skin).

It's a tribute to Fagan's thoughtful, disciplined teaching that his danc-

ers have long careers and that even the newest recruits to the 14-member company (that includes four fully utilized apprentices) look as if they'd been born into Fagan's unique style of modern dance with a slight, but pungent, Afro-Caribbean accent. Which means that none of them gives signs of ever having studied ballet—and I intend that as a compliment. A leg raised to the back in Fagan-language is not an arabesque; it's too free-floating, too unstrained for that, and it's just the right height to form a long diagonal line with the dancer's tipped forward torso.

The big news of this season is that Pennewell has begun to choreograph. His *Hylozoic* is a Joyce premiere. Hylozoism affirms that matter is not separable from life, and that idea, in a sense, is what this work and most of Fagan's dances celebrate: human beings express-

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ing a vital force that resonates with nature. As you'd expect, Pennewell's movement and formal acuity are rooted in his mentor's style. But right away, there's a smart quirk. *Hylozoic* starts with five dancers lined up on one side of the stage and five more far away on the other side, like the red and black opponents on a game board. Although

those in one line face the center of the stage, a few of those opposite face away.

To music by John Adams, Adam Rudolph, and Yusef Lateef, Pennewell deploys his cast, always finding ways to reiterate or allude to those lines close to the wings, while bringing certain dancers to our attention. Lindsay Renea, wearing bright pink tights and a flowered shirt (costumes by Colette Hawkins), has a solo; so does Depass. Depass, Vitolio Jeune, and Michael Fernandez zoom into prominence as a trio. Shanon Castle and John Mercado perform a little duet. A promising choreographic debut.

Speaking of duets, Fagan makes intriguing ones, and I don't just mean that, in group works like the excellent *Woza* (1999), partnering often ignores traditional gender roles. Duets such as the slow, fluid excerpt from the 1991 *Griot New York*, wonderfully performed at the Joyce by Pennewell and Depass, show tenderness and eroticism in unusual ways, as in a repeated "kiss," in which the lovers, embraced, roll their profiles gently together from forehead to chin and back again. In a beautiful, confined duet in *Woza* that Pennewell dances with talented apprentice Megan Evans, she tips forward and levers one leg high; he rubs his cheek the length of that leg, until she can caress the top of his head with her foot.

Fagan's premiere, *Thanks Forty*, is a celebratory suite, set, as is his wont, to highly contrasting pieces of music—in this case, by Dmitri Shostakovich, Bonga Kwenda, and Gerald Albright (only a man of daring and astute musicality would attempt this). Even when facing us, Depass, mated with a Shostakovich cello concerto, performs as if deep in thought or contemplating herself in a mirror. I'm reminded of how adroitly Fagan varies not only dynamic texture, but the way movement alights on the individual performer—now involving the whole body, now distilled into an arm gesture or the roll of a head.

In *Thanks Forty*, he shows off four men, including that fantastic jumper, Khama Kgari, and four women, including lithe Kaori Otani. All wear a variety of beguiling costumes by Lena-Marie Scheafer. And for the finale, "Fete-Joys," to Albright's "Capetown Strut," Fagan unleashes his most carefree blend of form and exuberant physicality. Suddenly his excellent lighting designer, Hideaki Tsutsui, turns the stage golden, and Depass, Humphrey, and Pennewell appear in front of their festive colleagues. The three revel in a good-time-pals display—erupting together into those spraddle-legged jumps typical of Fagan, Humphrey grinning as he ducks Depass's long, upraised leg when Pennewell spins her around.

An anniversary and a debut well worth lifting a glass to.

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