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Choreographer Garth Fagan celebrates Nelson Mandela

By CHARMAINE PATRICIA WARREN
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Talk with Garth Fagan about his new work, "Madiba," and he constantly returns to the word "positive" and all that it represents. "There are too many negatives [in life]," he insists, "but we have more positive conditions...that we should celebrate."

"Madiba," a purposefully non-narrative work, is inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela, the South African leader who reigned as president after the end of apartheid in that country. The title comes from the name of Mandela's family clan.

Fagan is sure to caution that there are no allegorical references in the work to Mandela's political, personal or social life. "That would be narrative, and I didn't want to get involved [in that]." Instead, Fagan offers a representation of the "pride and aspiration that [Mandela] gave to me just by all he overcame."

For Fagan, much of the work is fed by Mandela's "indomitable spirit," by the man who was imprisoned for more than 20 years under savage conditions but continued to fight for his

people and his country.

Mandela, Fagan reminds us, was forced to face the indignities of segregation, always surviving physically and mentally. There aren't many examples of positive acts like this, Fagan notes, but Mandela's ability to move forward through it all is "wonderful and healing...[because he] chose to leave a bitter past behind and looked ahead to the positive."

The Jamaican-born Fagan is known for going to the root of the matter, only being satisfied when he understands the origin of movement before branding it with his own signature style, all the while showing respect. The making of "Madiba" was no different.

Fagan looked to the South African circle dance, which he feels is an interesting dynamic because it suggests and celebrates many things concurrently. The movement, "vigorous and pelvic-orient-

ed; coming straight from the pelvic girdle. [It] starts there but then goes backward." This complex dance informed the movements for "Madiba."

To be sure, this South African movement style and quality combined with Fagan's reverence for Mandela's legacy helped craft this homage. "Madiba" is set to music by South African musician Abdullah Ibrahim, whose score, Fagan admits, was perfect from the first time he heard it. Garth Fagan Dance is presenting the world premier of "Madiba" starting Oct. 4, and it promises to be the centerpiece for the company's season.

Longtime company member Norwood Pennewell will also present a world premiere, "Liminal Flux," which "plays with perspective and patterning to express the interior journey it explores." Pennewell's 2010 work, "Hylozoic," will also return.

Also slated for the season are the following Fagan works: "Thanks Forty" (2010), a celebration of the company's four-decade history; "Translation Transition" (2002), set to a jazz score by Jazz Jamaica All Stars, offering up a fair share of Jamaican ska, reggae and mento; excerpts from "Senku" (2006) and "Until, By & If" (1990), "Memoriam" (2001), created to honor the victims of 9/11 and their families; and "Prelude: Discipline is Freedom" (1983), showing Fagan's singular style, which is distinguished by its complex polyrhythmic demands on the dancers and its fusion of modern, ballet and Afro-Caribbean dance.

Garth Fagan Dance runs Oct. 4-9 at the Joyce. For more information, visit www.joyce.org or call (212) 242-0800.

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