

Circle Dance Respect

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Garth Fagan pays homage to Nelson Mandela with 'Madiba'

By Susan Reiter

How does one evoke and honor an iconic figure such as Nelson Mandela through dance? There would seem to be plenty of risks in trying to choreograph a work about a man of such world-renowned achievements. Garth Fagan, whose compelling company returns to the Joyce next week, had long been inspired by Mandela's commitment and sacrifice in leading South Africa out of apartheid, and was intrigued by the possibility of expressing his admiration through dance. But it wasn't until he encountered the right musical score that he was spurred into action. The resulting work, *Madiba*, will have its world premiere at the Joyce.



Garth Fagan dancers Shanon Castle, Lindsay Renea, Kaori Otani and Amshel Padilla in Thanks 40. Photo by Yi-Chun Wu.

The title is the name of the Xhosa clan to which Mandela belongs, and refers to the ancestor from whom someone is descended. Madiba was the name of a Thembu chief who ruled in the Transkei in the 18th century. "That's what the people who really know Mandela call him—who grew up with him, and who know his clan," Fagan explained during a recent phone interview. Fagan did meet Mandela once—but not in South Africa, where Fagan and several of his dancers went when a production of *The Lion King* (for which Fagan did the Tony-winning choreography) was opening. "Mandela was ill then, so he couldn't come to *Lion King*—but he has seen it since, there and also in New York," he said. Fagan's meeting with the great leader occurred in his native Jamaica, at a ceremony honoring Mandela shortly after his release from his 27-year imprisonment.

"I'd been thinking about it for a while," Fagan said of his premiere, speaking from Texas, where his company was performing. "I was so impressed with what he did—to have survived over two decades of incarceration in a hostile environment, to come out of that, and become the magnificent leader that he is—not spewing hate, not going for revenge, none of that—just healing his country, and healing mankind. I truly respect Mandela—it goes beyond respect into love."

But Fagan did not rush to communicate that admiration on stage. "I just couldn't decide what spin I was going to take. I didn't want to do a narrative thing." When he listened to Abdullah Ibrahim's 2010 recording *Bombella*, one track helped him find his way. He had choreographed to scores by the prolific South African musician twice before. Fagan found the piece, "District Six," so rich that he has choreographed to it twice through for *Madiba*. "It's strong enough music that can take it, and I interpret the sections differently."

"Once I heard the music I said, this is it, this is what I need. This piece is a Circle Dance, which is something they do in South Africa. I just love the integrity of this music. It's all rhythmic and pulsating—and then out of the blue, from nowhere, comes what I call an anthem or a hymn. The actual Circle Dance they do in South Africa is much more robust and pelvic than what we do. But I'm not re-creating African dance; I'm doing my own movement. So it has the essence of that—some lovely pelvic isolations."

Fagan juxtaposes a youthful romantic couple with a more mature pair. Vitolio Jeune and new company member Tere Lyn Jones emerge out of the communal opening. "I needed a duet of two young people who are madly in love—playful and supportive. Then, later on in the piece, things become more reflective," the choreographer said. "I'm using PJ [his longtime lead dancer Norwood Pennewell] as a Mandela figure, but I'm not identifying him as such. There is a more mature lover, Nicolette Depass. They're kept apart by the circle dancers, and he's hurled into prison." But he emphasizes that the point of the dance is not biographical details, but "the influence and the ideas, and the genius of the man—to have overcome all of that, and come out as positive as he did. That's more important to me than the specifics."

The Rochester-based company will also perform a world premiere by Pennewell, who made such a bracing choreographic debut last year. His follow-up work, *Liminal Flux*, combines music by Miles Davis and Chancha Via Circuito. "I took him to hear Miles in Syracuse, in the late '80s," Fagan said. "The biggest compliment I could give him was that Miles would love this new piece, how he uses this music." Fagan, who encouraged his dancer to try his hand at choreography, stayed out of the way once Pennewell went into the studio. "While he's going through his choreographic chops, I know I've got to leave him alone to figure that out." He gave Pennewell the freedom to decide about music and the number of dancers. "Everything was his complete idea. That's the only way for art to exist, to my taste."

Garth Fagan Dance

Oct. 4–9, Joyce Theater, 175 8th Ave. (at W. 19th St.), www.joyce.org; \$19+.