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DANCE REVIEW

The unique vision of choreographer Garth Fagan

By Robert Johnson
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Nobody makes dances like Garth Fagan.

This master choreographer, whose company Garth Fagan Dance appeared Saturday at the State Theatre in New Brunswick, startles viewers with the originality of his compositions. Yet his works speak candidly to an audience. His dancers are virtuosos, yet they portray heartfelt situations.

The troupe performed two complete dances, and excerpts from other works — including “Madiba,” this season’s premiere — and “Until, By and If,” a major revival. Fans will have to chase the tour bus to Manhattan to catch the video-streaming that eventually will accompany “Madiba,” a tribute to South African leader Nelson Mandela.

In the meantime, this eclectic program underscored Fagan’s love of collage, and his choreographic sleight of hand. Significantly, this dancemaker has done more than inherit the tools of an



JODY SOMERS/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Norwood Pennewell, left, holds Lindsay Renea as they rehearse a scene from “Mudan.”

older generation, including Martha Graham and Pearl Primus. He also studied with Jamaican painter Albert Huie, and the techniques of visual artists such as Romare Bearden have influenced his style. Fagan’s way of manipulating planes in space,

especially in duets where the dancers’ limbs intersect spectacularly, grows from understanding the possibilities of painterly abstraction.

This sophistication does nothing to undercut the swell of emotion that carries onstage lovers Lindsay Renea

and Norwood Pennewell through a breathless duet from “Mudan.” Quite the opposite: The stylization of their encounter acts as a foil, heightening the intensity of feeling and making the dancers’ personalities sparkle. The same can be said of

Garth Fagan Dance, “Madiba”

Where: The Joyce Theater,
175 Eighth Ave. at 19th
Street, in New York

When: Through Sunday.
Tonight at 7:30 and
tomorrow to Saturday at 8
p.m., with matinees
Saturday and Sunday at 2
p.m.

How much: \$10 to \$59.
Call (212) 242-0800 or visit
joyce.org.

showboat solos such as the “Talking Drums” number from “Senku,” in which Vitolio Jeune now offers a heroic combination of leaping muscle and sensitivity, and the opening of “Thanks Forty,” in which Nicolette Depass transfixes viewers in drop-dead balances and coolly grinds her hips to Shostakovich.

Fagan’s use of music goes beyond the usual dialogue between steps and rhythm. A score will cut off, or a new vibe will emerge abruptly

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while the movement continues. In transitions such as these, different sections of a dance overlap and Fagan creates a composite image by layering elements atop one another, like transparent sheets of film.

Illuminating the human condition remains this artist’s goal, however. In “Madiba” Fagan offers a paradox, contrasting the joy of young love, in a thrilling and irrepressible duet for Jeune and company apprentice Tere Lyn Jones, with the travails of a martyr for freedom. As Mandela, Pennewell lies collapsed, isolated from the circle inside which Depass cradles an invisible infant, and the prisoner mourns for home.

In contrast to choreographers who revel in depicting mindless domestic violence, Fagan’s view of unhappy couples in “Until, By and If” seems tender and wise. The dancers enter in a shuffling mass, yet each remains an individual. Divided into couples, they seem to float, haunted by worries. One woman covers her partner’s mouth with her hand,

another broods resting her elbows on a partner’s upturned feet.

These people may be temporarily stymied, but they have not lost the capacity to think their way out of difficulties, summoning that “dancing firelight of the mind” by which Fagan, in a bow to poet Derek Walcott, will show them the path home.

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