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Asking the Questions

Garth Fagan Dance comes to the Hult

Garth Fagan likes "the speed and precision of ballet, the weight of modern dance, the polyrhythms of African dance and the experimentations of the post-moderns."

"And individuality is so important. That's the world we see on the street."

I caught up with Fagan, choreographer of *The Lion King* and head of Garth Fagan Dance company, when he was in Rochester, N.Y., his artistic home for almost 40 years. A great-grandfather (who wants to claim he's only 39 years old — though a quick biographical scan reveals he was born in 1940), Fagan's beginnings in dance were almost accidental:

"I was in high school. It was the Christmas production. Some guy broke his ankle, and the gym teacher asked me to fill in. I said yes because I knew it would annoy my father."

Soon he was going to modern dance class.

"And I noticed right away that the dancers had the hippest clothes, great parties, fast cars. I got interested for all the great wrong reasons!"

Ivy Baxter, his first dance teacher, tempered Fagan's adolescent bravado. "She was professional, very tough."

Fagan toured with The Ivy Baxter National Dance Theater, and she taught him how a company was run. She taught him how to be responsible, that you had to rehearse until you got it right: "She would sit in front of the studio door so we couldn't leave!"

And Baxter showed him Martha Graham's *A Dancer's World*. Fagan was inspired with the way Graham and Mary Hinkson presented male dancers who were strong.

In college at Wayne State, Fagan's studies began with "God, Moses and Mohammed" Hinkson, Graham, Alvin Ailey, José Limón. And at age 21, Fagan choreographed his first piece: "It was performed in silence, which was a really big deal at the time. And it was so vulgar! I was just showing off all the wonderful tricks I could do."

But his mentors "saw I had something special." And they told him to keep asking questions.

Fagan danced with Pearl Primus in Detroit during the era of Motown.

"Everyone was listening to the same stations. In the summer, you would pull up to a red light, windows down, and everyone, didn't matter, everybody would be

listening to the same music, and everybody was bouncing."

Fagan's early successes and interest in making dance accessible to non-dancers led him to a teaching position at State University of New York, Brockport. He recruited dancers from the community center, the basketball court and the soccer field, young people "who had all this talent and nothing to do with it."

And he created his first company, The Bottom of the Bucket... But Dance Theatre, in 1970. He felt like, "We're here now at the bottom, now watch us grow." And grow they did: 55-year-old Steve Humphrey, one of the founding company members, still tours.

Fagan says those early years were a "wonderful, dynamic" time. And he found himself in the role of mentor to a young company of untrained dancers. There was one early performance where he came backstage before the show to find "fried chicken everywhere."

Critics reveled in the Fagan aesthetic: Ballet, modern, African, with leaps and turns that seemed to spring from nowhere.

He was tired of what he had been seeing: "All that preparation, and two puny pirouettes? I thought, well, damn." In addition to rehearsals, members of Fagan's company take two two-hour technique classes every day.

Fagan is best known for his work on the Broadway production of *The Lion King*, for which he won a Tony award.

He laughs now. "You know dancers," he says. "When you tell them they're going to have a gazelle on each arm and one on their head, well, they just kind of fall apart."

But they worked it out, and the result is magical. I saw the piece in late September 2001, when, as a New Yorker, I was ready for something life-affirming. Even during the opening sequence, I started crying. Everyone in the audience was crying.

"I know every note, and I know every step," says Fagan. "But when I see it, I bawl too!"

There aren't many modern choreographers whose work is seen eight shows a week all over the world.

And in the production, Fagan wanted to "introduce the kids who come to modern, ballet, hip hop, so their minds can be influenced, so that they'll walk away saying, 'What was that kind of dancing, Mommy?'"

He wanted the audience to ask questions.

EW