Kings of creativity

A glimpse behind the scenes of another Fagan-Marsalis collaboration.

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Sade Bully during the rehearsal at Garth Fagan Dance.
There are moments when the sounds—trumpet, clarinet, piano, drums—will seem to lift the dancers up, spring them from the floor, make them fly.

The music, composed by jazz great Wynton Marsalis specifically for this new work choreographed by Garth Fagan, is eminently, wonderfully danceable.

But first, there’s silence.

Not a nervous silence, though that would be understandable. In just a few days, “Lighthouse/Lightning Rod” will premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with Garth Fagan Dance accompanied by the Wynton Marsalis septet. (The new work will be performed here at the Nazareth College Arts Center from Nov. 27 through Dec. 2; for these performances, the original music will be recorded.)

It’s the last day of rehearsals at the spacious Garth Fagan Dance studio on Chestnut Street in downtown Rochester. The two creative giants—Fagan and Marsalis—have been together most of the week to perfect their collaboration. Now it’s time for the dress rehearsal, to see if they’ve pulled it off.

**Ever ready**

Before the dress rehearsal in front of a small group, the dancers are deep into their quiet ritual of limbering up for the night’s performance.

Eyes forward and chins up, they twist their legs, twirl their torsos, loosen their muscles. Later, dancer Sade Bully will explain that Fagan, who founded the group more than 40 years ago, encourages them to stretch constantly, to be ever ready.

“He watches us,” she says, imitating how Fagan, like a father checking up on his children, will turn around and make sure they’re following what he says.
Preparing for flight

Bully says this after the dress rehearsal, after the applause, after the adrenaline rush of knowing that she has just taken part in something really, really good.

The cheers from the small preview audience are the reward for the months, indeed years, of work. They’re a payoff for the sore limbs and the falls and the time alone on the mat, silently stretching and stretching so that when the trumpet sounds, when the drums roll, your body will defy gravity and fly—ever so briefly fly.

Hours and days and years on the mat for moments of transcendence. “It’s a dancer’s life,” says Vitalio Jeune, a soloist and rising star in the company. “I love it.”

Beyond comfort zones

Earlier in the day, Garth Fagan, the 72-year-old Jamaican-born choreographer of The Lion King—the creator not just of the dance company but of this multifaceted kind of dance that’s athletic and fluid all at once—arrives for an afternoon rehearsal.

If he’s worried (later he will say that the performance still needs an ending), it doesn’t show. Rather, Fagan has the air of a gracious, fun and relaxed uncle, someone who wants to make sure that all visitors are comfortable, as if he has invited them into his living room. He even gives a visiting New York City critic a hug.

But this is also the Garth Fagan who asks his dancers to do the seemingly impossible.

“He’s pushed me beyond anything I thought I could do,” says Bully, also a native of Jamaica. “If he sees you’re comfortable with something, he asks you to do more.”

All the dancers are ready to rehearse. The Marsalis Septet, a group of all-star musicians, is ready as well. They’ve been in town for three days for the first live sessions with the dancers, who, for weeks, had practiced to a recording of the piece.

But wait.

Where’s Marsalis, the 50-year-old trumpet-playing member of an
her iPad, he backs away in mock shock. "I don't own a computer," he says and then points to a reporter holding a notebook and a pen. "I'm with you."

After all, Fagan possesses a hands-on, low-tech method of creation that never needs an upgrade.

"I choreograph in silence," he tells The New York Times. "I give the dancers the movement and see if it holds up. And then I turn on the music, and the dancers are so excited to see how it fits."

By this point in the rehearsal, Fagan doesn't need to say a lot to the dancers. But he does meet with them in the middle of the studio after the afternoon rehearsal. The dancers sit and look up at Fagan. Fagan talks, dispensing praise. Then, every once in awhile, everyone breaks out in applause. Things have gone well.

**Easy does it**

Fagan and Marsalis created "Light House/Lightning Rod" by long distance.

First, Fagan gave Marsalis his idea for the new work, one that would explore the thin line between danger and safety, the lighthouse offering hope in a storm, the lightning rod capturing the electricity that could kill.

Then Marsalis wrote nine pieces of music and sent them on to Fagan, who, in turn, shuffled things around a bit to create a three-part work.

The first section is generally upbeat, the middle examines some troubling memories, and the third works up to what Fagan describes as "a fast, furious, deliciously played up-tempo" ending.

The work asks a lot of the dancers, but they've learned to make the difficult seem easy. Or, as clarinetist Goines says, "The physicality is masked by their talent."

Conversely, the dancers can make the normal seem sublime, as in a moment when Bully, Nicolette Depass and Jeffrey Labbé walk arm-in-arm across the floor. Yes, walk. They do even that better than the rest of the world.

Fagan, too, can make it all seem so simple. Amid the challenges of the day, he welcomed the audience to the dress rehearsal, relaxed and smiling, ever the host in his "living room."

And then he walked back to his chair. A charged, suspenseful silence descended again—just briefly—before the music and the dance began. R

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