



## Fagan's style shines in dance concert

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BY HEDY WEISS

Modern dance companies can have a difficult time filling even a modest venue, yet the Harris Theater for Music and Dance attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd Saturday evening for a concert by Garth Fagan Dance - a 37-year-old troupe based in upstate Rochester, N.Y.

Though the company itself is hardly a household name, Fagan comes with a high-profile imprimatur. He is, of course, the choreographer who set all those masked and headdress-bearing creatures moving so hypnotically through "The Lion King," the hit Broadway musical.

The Harris concert, which featured a cross-section of the work Fagan has created from 1981 to the present, revealed a far more complex and sophisticated side of the man. Here is a choreographer whose gift for abstraction is matched by a subtle and powerful ability to suggest relationships in pure dance terms. And while Fagan's company of 11 dancers features all sizes, shapes and types, they are wholly unified in their virtuosic interpretation of his work.

The concert clearly highlighted the hallmarks of Fagan's style: The way he structures works like a jazz musician, often taking his variations way out on a limb yet always returning "home"; his frequent use of silence at the start of a piece, so that the arrival of music seems like a continuum; his use of extreme, angular balances that can quickly shatter into chaotic flurries of motion; his playful way with exits and entrances from the stage's wings; and his ability to sculpt charming moments of male-female connection that suggest intimacy and edginess.

The program's opening work, "Prelude: Discipline is Freedom" (from the early 1980s), has the structure of a dance class, and is reminiscent of Martha Graham's homage to the beauty and furious demands of that daily ritual. The movements are slow and set to silence at the start, but grow increasingly fast, furious and difficult as the dancers traverse the stage, first to the music of Abdullah Ibrahim and then to the drumming of Max Roach. The full company - Norwood Pennewell, Steve Humphrey, Bill Ferguson, Nicolette Depass, Guy Thorne, Annique Roberts, Kaori Otani, Demetrius Blocker, Khama Phillips, Lynet Rochelle and Kelly Benjamin - drove the whole thing to a thrilling crescendo.

For a breather, there was a duet from "Detail: Down Home Also," an intriguing suggestion of a couple's ups and downs, danced by Pennewell and Depass. Then the full ensemble gathered again for "River Song," an intriguing mix of American Indian dance rituals set to a blend of Indian chants and jazz.

"Life: Dark/Light," a suite of three dances set to the music of Billy Bang, is comprised of two exuberant and sassy "civilian" sequences separated by what surely was the most riveting dance on the program - a duet for two men, "Kiama," that reflected Bang's experiences in the Vietnam War. Brilliantly danced by Pennewell and Ferguson (one dressed in army camouflage pants, the other in a similar shirt), it masterfully captured the nature of soldiers' routines, their inner torment and their life-and-death struggles. This is a most eloquent, minimalist masterpiece. And in the "Light" scene that followed, Fagan suggested, through the attitude-filled perambulations of five women in gauzy white jumpsuits, just how different life is for those far from a battlefield.

The final work on the program, "Translation Transition," called to mind Fagan's roots on the island of Jamaica with a sensual, hip-swinging, high energy, dance-til-you-drop festival of motion set to music of the Jazz Jamaica All Stars.