

Anna Reguero
Garth Fagan/Wynton Marsalis
BAM Concert Review 2013

Garth Fagan Dance and the Wynton Marsalis Septet joined forces for their second collaboration, premiering a new work and revitalizing excerpts from a famed repertory piece at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Thursday night to a packed audience that included celebrities such as the Brooklyn Nets and composer Philip Glass. The concert highlighted Fagan's ability to capture underlying musical structures through movement, and the company's ability to find the groove despite the irregularity of the choreographed patterns.

The concert celebrated a number of milestones: BAM's 150th anniversary year, its Next Wave Festival's 30th anniversary, and it also capped off Garth Fagan Dance's 40th anniversary (a milestone the company has been celebrating since 2010). Performances in New York City run through Sunday. The company will encore the concert in Rochester at the Nazareth College Arts Center from November 27 to December 2, using a recording of the music composed by Marsalis.

Griot New York (1991) is one of the company's most celebrated works for its abstract portrayal of the black experience in New York in the early '90s. Marsalis' score swings and wails, staying true to its swing and New Orleans roots in all its originality. Fagan, too, takes cues in his movement from the swing-era. Loose, swinging limbs, cross-body footwork, and even Charleston-style kicks take on new life when combined with Fagan's gravity defying poses and sensuously tangled duets.

The work was danced with a relaxed precision on Thursday night, particularly by the company's longtime members: Norwood Penewell and Nicolette Depass, whose "Spring Yaounde" duet was executed with breathtaking intimacy, and also in a solo danced by Natalie Rogers who returned to the company this year after directing Fagan's dance school for many years prior.

What's often forgotten in the collective memory of the work is the total effect of the choreography with the arresting stage design, costumes, and lighting. The live performance at BAM brought together all the elements of Martin Puryear's supersized surrealist figures and era-defining costumes, as well as stage lighting by C.T. Oakes that set the moods of intimacy and celebration in minimalistic but effective ways.

Set next to the new work, *Griot New York* seems dated by the early '90s period in which it was created. In contrast, *Lighthouse/Lightning Rod* felt updated and contemporary, both in the choreography and music.

The contemporary aspects of the work first stem from Marsalis' bop-inspired score, a type of jazz that is irregular in its rhythmic and phrasing structures. Since choreography and music were created separately, coming together only during rehearsals last week, it would be expected that the movement and music wouldn't be in exact agreement. Indeed, the dance structures didn't always fit with the difficult surface structures of the music. But the dancers were able to find the accents within Marsalis' music at any point within their patterns, Fagan's movement allowing them freedom for bodily accentuation.

The juxtaposition of safety and danger is at the heart of *Lighthouse/Lightning Rod*, and some of the movements succeeded at an abstract representation of such elements. The opening movement “Lighthouse” explored safety and danger in movement that pushed dancers to the edge of their balance, finding safety in each other through various groupings. The middle movement, “Memories,” featured a solo for Penewell with unexpected stops, extended back holds, and off-beat body isolations, all dangerously controlled.

However, the work had difficulty coming together as a cohesive whole due to the varying degree of thematic unity in each of the movements. The final section of the middle movement was a clear statement on slavery where dancers in maid outfits and overalls were given highly direct movement of suffrage and struggle while two dancers, one white and the other black, danced in the harmony the two races have found since. It served as a significant political statement, perhaps, but ultimately clashed with the rest of the work for its overt material. The final movement was dangerous only in its athletic pace and detailed footwork, but mostly served as an upbeat celebration with far too obvious hanging lightning rods and black costumes with silver, sparkling sashes.

Nonetheless, each movement features movement that is, individually, a creative achievement. Marsalis’ score, the looming and transcendent sculptures created by Guggenheim fellow Alison Saar, and the colorful lighting by Jeffrey McRoberts only heightened their affect.

Fagan’s new work may not rise to the same fame as *Griot New York*, but it did receive a significant response on Thursday’s concert at BAM. With two highly visible, artistic minds such as Fagan and Marsalis joining together to create a work with a contemporary edge, the work certainly has a future as a long-lived repertory work.