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The Guide
A theatergoer’s resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

Dreamgirls
By Michael Bennett, Henry Krieger, and Tom Eyen

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* A special thanks to The Grand Theatre for information found in this guide

PCS’s 2014-15 Education & Community Programs are generously supported by:

PCS’s education programs are supported in part by a grant from the Oregon Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.

with additional support from

Marie Lamfrom Charitable Foundation
PGE Foundation
Oregon Arts Commission
National Endowment for the Arts
Wessinger Foundation
Herbert A. Templeton Foundation
and other generous donors.
This groundbreaking musical takes you to a revolutionary time in American music history when rhythm and blues blended with other styles of popular music and created a new American sound—Motown. In the ‘60s, three friends form The Dreamettes, get their big break at an amateur competition, and begin singing backup vocals for a major star. As their own fame grows, however, things begin to spin out of control when their agent’s business maneuvers trump their friendship, and fortune and success take them down a path of heartbreak and turmoil. Over two decades The Dreams, as they become known, learn hard lessons about love, trust and the changing tastes of the American public.

Winner of 6 Tony Awards, including Best Book of a Musical.

Setting


The Songs

**Act I**
- I’m Looking for Something, Baby
- Goin’ Downtown
- Takin’ the Long Way Home
- Move (You’re Steppin’ on My Heart)
- Fake Your Way to the Top
- Cadillac Car
- On the Road – Cadillac Car
- Movin’ Out/Recording Studio
- Cadillac Car (Reprise)
- Steppin’ to the Bad Side
- Party, Party
- Baby-Baby
- Family
- Dreamgirls
- Reporters
- Heavy
- Walkin’ Down the Strip
- It’s All Over
- (And I’m Telling You) I’m Not Going

**Act II**
- Opening (Reprise: Dreamgirls)
- I Am Changing
- I Am Changing - Vogue
- You Are My Dream
- Ain’t No Party
- I Meant You No Harm
- The Rap
- I Miss You Old Friend
- One Night Only
- One Night Only - Disco
- Chicago
- Hard to Say Goodbye (My Love)

Source from the Dream Girls script © Tom Eyen and John F. Breglio
Characters

Deena Jones
The “Dreamettes” backup, later lead singer (played by Mary Patton)

Lorrell Robinson
The “Dreamettes” backup singer (played by Lexi Rhoades)

Effie Melody White
The “Dreamettes” lead Singer (played by Nattalyee Randall)

C.C. White
Composer, Effie’s brother (played by Calvin Scott Roberts)

Jimmy Early (James Thunder)
Principal “soul” singer (played by David Jennings)

Michelle Morris
backup singer, replacement for Effie (played by Antoinette Comer)

Wayne
record producer/director (played by Don Kenneth Mason)

Frank
Press agent (played by Jonathan Burke)

Jerry Norman
nightclub owner (played by Terry Lavell)

Stage Manager
TV studio (played by Larry Owens)

Mr. Morgan
Effie’s Lawyer (played by Terry Lavell)

Marty
Theatrical agent for James “Thunder” Early (played by Tyrone Roberson)

Curtis Taylor, Jr.
Cadillac dealer/manager for the Dreams (played by Rodney Hicks)
Michael Bennett (April 8, 1943 – July 2, 1987) was an American musical theater director, writer, choreographer, and dancer. He won seven Tony Awards for his choreography and direction of Broadway shows and was nominated for an additional eleven.

Bennett choreographed *Promises, Promises*, *Follies* and *Company*. In 1976, he won the Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical and the Tony Award for Best Choreography for the Pulitzer Prize–winning musical *A Chorus Line*. Bennett, together with producer Joseph Papp, created *A Chorus Line*, based on a workshop process which Bennett pioneered. He also directed and co-choreographed *Dreamgirls* with Michael Peters.

Tom Eyen (August 14, 1940 - May 26, 1991) was an American playwright, lyricist, television writer and theatre director. Eyen is best known for works at opposite ends of the theatrical spectrum. Mainstream theatergoers became acquainted with him in 1981 when he partnered with composer Henry Krieger and director Michael Bennett to write the book and lyrics for *Dreamgirls*. Eyen's career started, however, with avant-garde plays and musicals that he wrote and directed off-off Broadway in the early 1960s, which eventually led to off-Broadway success in the 1970s with the controversial nudity-filled performance-art play *The Dirtiest Show in Town* and *Women Behind Bars*, a camp parody of women's prison exploitation films.

*Broadway Premiere*

Dreamgirls received its premiere on December 20, 1981 at the Imperial Theater.

Original Broadway Premiere Cast:
Jennifer Holliday, Obba Babatunde, Cleavant Derricks, Loretta Devine, Ben Harney and Sheryl Lee Ralph

Taken from [http://www.broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/dreamgirls.htm](http://www.broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/dreamgirls.htm)
Henry Krieger was born in New York City, grew up in Westchester County, and attended Scarborough Country Day School. Henry was known to occasionally miss a day of school to take the train to 125th Street with an accomplice to see his favorite performers at the Apollo Theatre. While still in his twenties, Henry began composing for Off-Off-Broadway. Soon, collaborations with Tom Eyen and Broadway director/producer/choreographer Michael Bennett led to a workshop production of what was originally entitled Big Dreams. After several workshops, numerous rewrites, and an out of town tryout in Boston, Dreamgirls came to Broadway in 1981 and was nominated for thirteen Tony Awards (including Best Score) - winning six. One song, “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going” became a top hit, and others became popular as well. Mr. Krieger also composed the scores to The Tap Dance Kid, (1983-85) with Robert Lorick; and the acclaimed Side Show, (1997-98), written with Bill Russell and directed and choreographed by Robert Longbottom.

http://www.henrykrieger.com/about-henry.html

R&B Music

Rhythm and blues (R&B), which combines soulful singing and a strong backbeat, was the most popular music created by and for African Americans between the end of World War II (1941-45) and the early 1960s.

Surging employment during World War II accelerated the migration of the rural poor to cities and helped create a younger, more urban black audience. By 1946 the decade-long dominance of swing music was fading, but the demand for exciting dance music remained. Early R&B artists broke away from the big band formula by typically performing in small combos and emphasizing blues-style vocals and song structures. Saxophone and piano were still prominent, but electric guitar and bass added volume and intensity, making the new sound ideal for radio and jukeboxes.

Billboard magazine coined the term rhythm and blues to rename its “race records” chart in 1949, reflecting changes in the social status, economic power, and musical tastes of African Americans. Promoted by new, independently owned record labels and radio stations marketed to blacks, R&B also captured the imagination of young white audiences and led directly to the popularity of rock and roll.

http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/rhythm-and-blues-music-overview

Soul Music by Paul Susi

The development of popular music in the late 50s and 60s consistently reflected the passion and upheaval of America in that period. The term “Soul Music” refers to a loose movement during those years that succeeded in infusing the existing R & B and Pop sound with charismatic gospel inflections and searing heartfelt emotion. Beginning with Sam Cooke and Ray Charles, and continuing with Wilson Pickett, Smokey Robinson, James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, and group acts like The Temptations, The Spinners, and The Supremes, Soul Music heavily influenced the prevailing Pop Music of the time. (The term “blue-eyed Soul” describes the pattern of white musicians adopting black Soul attributes and themes in their music—i.e., the Rolling Stones, Van Morrison, Rod Stewart, Michael McDonald, etc.) More traditional Blues singers like Nina Simone and Taj Mahal allowed Soul to influence their music, too, often blurring the distinctions between Blues and Soul to the benefit of their audiences. Soul also paved the way for Funk and Disco, musical forms that emphasized and elaborated on rhythm and percussion as it emerged and evolved through the late 60s and 70s.

In its heyday, Soul Music tended to be fronted by charismatic, often preternaturally gifted male performers (James Brown, Jackie Wilson) with a knack for showmanship as well as powerful vocal talent. By contrast, women performers, with rare exceptions, tended to be relegated to backup vocals and dance roles regardless of their talent and charisma. During this period, Soul provided a vehicle for political and social consciousness, with artists challenging their audiences to political activism and racial integration/consciousness through the sheer crossover popularity of their music, and their ability to speak to so broad an audience by virtue of this celebrity. Unfortunately, this also often lead to a severely topical, time-specific feel to the music, which soon drove away white audiences who were reluctant to engage in the difficult conversations around race and poverty. By the late 70s, as tastes changed and audiences sought less thematically complicated and more danceable music, Soul Music was eclipsed by Disco.
Similarities to the Supremes

Although it has been denied, *Dreamgirls* is said to be loosely based on the history of a girl-group from Detroit, The Supremes. There are many similarities in the plot that closely match actual events throughout The Supremes career.

**Similarities**

- Like The Dreams, The Supremes were the most successful African-American female singing group of the 60s. Both groups were able to crossover to the pop charts and helped pave the way for other African-American soul and R&B artists in the industry.

- In *Dreamgirls* the character Effie strongly resembles the original lead singer of The Supremes, Florence Ballard.

- Like Effie, Florence’s voice was considered the most powerful and best sounding out of the three girls.

- In *Dreamgirls* Effie began to miss rehearsals and shows after Deena was appointed lead singer for the group and was therefore replaced and fired from The Dreams. Florence Ballard from The Supremes also missed rehearsals and shows and was fired by Berry Gordy Jr. and then replaced.

- Like Florence Ballard, Effie spent some time on welfare attempting to start a solo career.

- In the original workshop of *Dreamgirls* (Project #9), Effie White’s character died at the end of the first act. The ending was originally changed when Jennifer Holliday was upset that her character died so soon in the play. The original idea of Effie’s death could have been based on the fact that Florence Ballard died in 1976 at the age of 32.

- In *Dreamgirls*, the character Deena Jones is very similar to real life Supreme, Diana Ross.

- Curtis Taylor Jr., manager of The Dreams, and Berry Gordy Jr., manager of The Supremes, are similar in the fact that they both became romantically involved with one of the girls who was then appointed lead singer of the group. Curtis became involved with Deena naming the group Deena Jones & The Dreams while Gordy became involved with Diana Ross and named the group Diana Ross & The Supremes.

- Curtis Taylor Jr. is also similar to Berry Gordy, Jr., in that Gordy was the founder of Motown Records pushed The Supremes towards pop success. Curtis was the founder of Rainbow Records and pushed The Dreams toward pop success in *Dreamgirls*.

- Mary Wilson of The Supremes is similar to the character Lorrell in *Dreamgirls* as she was involved in a relationship with male R&B star Abdul “Duke” Fakir of The Four Tops. In *Dreamgirls* Lorrell is romantically involved with James “Thunder” Early who is depicted as a male R&B star.

- The character Michelle Morris who replaces Effie in *Dreamgirls*, is representative of Cindy Birdsong who replaced Florence Ballard in The Supremes.

- Similarly with The Supremes like with The Dreams, favouritism took place. Berry Gordy chose Diana to sing lead as Curtis chose Deena. Both men chose one women out of the group to make into a star which may or may not have had anything to do with the romantic relationship between them.

**Differences**

- The three girls in The Dreams are originally from Chicago, Illinois unlike The Supremes who were originally from Detroit, Michigan.

- In *Dreamgirls*, Effie is able to find success as a solo performer and reunites with The Dreams. Florence Ballard from The Supremes attempted a solo career but was unsuccessful and died after sinking into poverty.

- Unlike Curtis, who was originally romantically involved with Effie before becoming involved with Deena, Berry Gordy Jr., was not known to have been involved with Florence Ballard before beginning a relationship with Diana Ross.
Motown Records

Motown Records Corporation is a record label company that played a major role in the racial integration of popular music. Originally based out of Detroit, Michigan the record company was known as Tamla Records in 1959 before changing its name in 1960 to Motown Records Corporation in association with “The Motor City” Detroit. Motown Records was founded by Berry Gordy Jr. who started the company with an $800 loan from his family. Motown was the first record label to be owned by an African-American and feature mainly African-American artists and groups who wanted to break through to the pop charts. Motown was known for its unique mixture of soul music with a pop influence which was trademarked “The Motown Sound”.

Motown Record's headquarters was located in the Hitsville U.S.A. building in Detroit, Michigan from 1959 to 1968. The Miracles, the first group to be signed by Berry, was a group who he had written and produced songs for. Eventually Smokey Robinson, The Miracles’ lead singer, became Vice President of the company. By 1960 the label had songs reach the number two and number one spots on the R&B charts and peak at number two on the Billboard Hot 100. The first US number one pop hit for the label was The Marvelettes song, “Please Mr. Postman”. By 1964 the company was one of the most successful independent record companies in the United States.

By 1971 Motown Records had produced 110 Top Ten hits and had signed artists such as Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross & The Supremes and The Jackson 5. Berry Gordy Jr. established Motown Productions for television which produced specials for Motown artists. In 1975, Motown records left Detroit for Los Angeles, California with the objective of branching out into the motion picture industry. The company lost many of its clients and staff due to the move but continued successfully.

In 1988, Gordy sold the company for $61 million to Music Corporation of America (MCA). In 1989 he sold the Motown Productions TV/film operations to Suzanne de Passe who renamed the company de Passe Entertainment Boston Ventures. The company went through many ups and downs during the 90s. Although they continued to sign successful artists such as Boyz II Men, executives of the company came and went. In 1991, Motown sued MCA and began releasing product through PolyGram. Three years later PolyGram bought Motown from Boston Ventures. In 1998, PolyGram was taken over by Seagram and Motown folded into Universal Music Group. In 2005 Motown was merged with Universal Records to create Universal Motown Records Group.

Presently Motown’s roster includes India.Arie, Mila J, Erykah Badu, Babyface, Kevin Ross and Stevie Wonder.

Further Listening

The following Soul / Blues / R & B artists were active throughout the period in which Dreamgirls takes place. Note: this is not a comprehensive list.


Discussion Questions

How did the music they performed reflect the conflict the Dreams experienced?

How does body image continue to affect music and celebrity today?

What are the differences between the group as it began (“The Dreamettes”) and The Dreams as they ended?

The character Curtis, as manager of the Dreams, makes several major business decisions throughout the musical. How do his decisions affect his ambition, and how do they affect the ambitions of the Dreams?

How do you prioritize loyalty to your friends and family versus your personal or professional ambition?

The character Marty at one point accuses Effie of wanting “all of the privileges with none of the responsibilities.” What does this line mean to you?

How does your professional or creative ambition change over time?