



Dreamgirls

(Prince Music Theater, 450 seats, \$55 top) A Prince Music Theater presentation of a musical in two acts, with music by Henry Krieger, book and lyrics by Tom Eyrn. Directed by Richard M. Parison, Jr. Music direction, Jesse Vargas. Choreography, Mercedes Ellington.

Effie - Nova Y. Payton
Deena - Chauntee Schuler
Lorrell - CJay Hardy Philip
Michele - Vanessa A. Jones
Curtis - Erick Pinnick
C.C. - Forrest McClendon
Jimmy - Eugene Fleming
Marty - Milton Craig Neely
M.C. - James T. Lane

By [TOBY ZINMAN](#)

Still electrifying audiences after three extensions and several cast changes, the Philadelphia revival of "Dreamgirls" is a certified hit. (Originally scheduled perfs sold out within two weeks of opening.) To the uninitiated, the legendary Michael Bennett Broadway show is hugely entertaining; to the initiated, it has survived the intervening 25 years spectacularly -- and looks to be further bolstered by Bill Condon's movie version, due in December. But the essence of the show is the live energy of the singers, the impact of onstage performance. And there is energy to burn in the Prince production, fueled by a uniformly strong cast.

The almost entirely sung-through plot follows ur-girl-group The Dreamettes from their start in a talent contest to their success through the manipulation of their manager, Curtis (Erick Pinnick), to their bust-up as vocally superior Effie (Nova Y. Payton) is shoved aside for the prettier Deena (Chauntee Schuler), concluding with their teary reunion.

As plump, temperamental Effie, Payton is sensational; her bring-the-house-down act-one closer, "(And I'm Telling You) I'm Not Going," goes on and on, longer than seems humanly possible, and she had the crowd shouting and clapping. As Deena, Schuler uses a tame, colorless voice when she's the lead Dream, but

during the sung arguments backstage, as the real Deena, we hear her vocal power.

The history of the Dreams (they drop the suffix when they drop their girlish naivete) is, in part, the history of the pop music industry and its uneasy race relations. Soul eventually segues into disco, and Jimmy (the sensational Eugene Fleming) -- a kind of Little Richard figure in a leopard suit and flabbergasting pompadour -- finds himself a has-been, despite finally breaking into the all-white hotels of Miami and Las Vegas. We watch and hear the song "One Night Only" morph from the beautiful simplicity of its original version to the high-voltage vulgar Dream production number.

C.C. (Forrest McClendon), Effie's talented song-writing brother, learns the hard lesson of being true to yourself, and various hearts are broken and mended as love affairs and marriages work out or don't. Curtis, now married to Deena, views her as a valuable property, and when she finally breaks free, his reprise of his gorgeously sung seductive number, "When I First Saw You," makes the audience laugh with contempt for the snake.

Perhaps the funniest moment in the show comes when the girls are told they will get, in addition to long gowns, new wigs, and they shriek with excitement. The wigs are, indeed shriek-worthy, growing both in size and exoticism as time goes by.

The lavish costumes -- involving a zillion quick changes -- are simply fabulous. This is bling before the fact, and the slinky glitter, like the girls' over-produced numbers, is excessive beyond belief. Much of the fun of the show seems to be watching it walk the sharp edge of parody while still delivering the thing itself. **With:** Piper Lindsay Arpan, Erika Vaughn, Nako Adodoadji, Gillian Burke, Janelle Neal, Ryan C. Haggett, Correy West, Grebb Baker, James Clark, James T. Lane, Denver Andre Taylor, Jason J. Michael.

Sets and projection, Todd Edward Ivins; costumes, Mark Mariani; lighting, Troy Martin-O'Shia; wigs, Jason Hayes; sound, Nick Kourtides; production stage manager, Lori Aghazarian. Opened Dec. 3, 2005. Reviewed Feb 9, 2006. Running time: 2 HOURS, 40 MIN.