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## More than just a 'Dream': Musical a cautionary tale of pop stardom

James D. Watts Jr.

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From top, Majeste Pearson plays Deena, Kubbi is Lorrell and DeVon Douglass is Effie in Theatre Tulsa's production of "Dreamgirls." This Tony Award-winning musical traces the history of a 1960s-era "girl group" similar to the Supremes.

Courtesy, Josh New

James D. Watts Jr.

**T**he creators of the musical "Dreamgirls" insisted they did not base the show on the career of the Supremes, but rather that the story they were telling was inspired by any number of R&B artists who came to prominence during the 1960s.

While there is no denying that what transpires in "Dreamgirls" closely mirrors the early years of the Supremes, there is more than a grain of truth to writer Tom Eyrn and composer Henry Krieger's assertion that the musical told a more universal story.

It's something that comes through sharply in Theatre Tulsa's production of "Dreamgirls," which opened Friday at the Tulsa PAC.

To put it simply, "Dreamgirls" is a Faustian tale, in which people hungry for success, whether they be complete innocents or seasoned folk who should know better, find themselves willing and eager to sacrifice anything and anyone to grasp at the goodies a smooth-talking charmer offers.

In "Dreamgirls," the Mephistophelean character figure is Curtis Taylor Jr. (Obum Ukabam), a huckster fresh off the used car lot, determined to make his way in the world of music. And one night, while hanging around backstage at Harlem's Apollo Theater during a talent show, Curtis spots a trio of young girls just in from Chicago that bill themselves as the Dreamettes.

Effie White (De'Von Douglass) is the acknowledged leader of the group — she's got the powerful, soulful voice, and she's got more than enough attitude to bulldoze her way to the stardom she knows she deserves.

While Curtis is willing to woo Effie, he also has his eyes on a couple of greater prizes — namely, the songwriting talent of Effie's brother C.C. (Graceson Todd), and the physical beauty and radio-friendly voice of Deena Jones (Majeste Pearson), who up to this time has been happy singing backup with Lorrell Robinson (Kubbi).

Curtis also quickly exerts his sway over James "Thunder" Early (Nash McQuarters), who is finding it difficult to hold on to audiences with the gospel-fueled music that used to raise the roof of any club he played.

All that's required to achieve Curtis' vision of a "brand new sound" is — to put it simply — get rid of the soul. To Curtis, this means toning down the energy of the music and those who perform it, so that the results will be palatable to white audiences. But the reality is that this plan requires artists to deny their true, authentic selves to make money.

Theatre Tulsa and director Kelli McLoud-Schingen have assembled a fine cast to tell this cautionary tale, led by a trio of excellent performances by the women who make up the titular trio. Pearson will occasionally channel a bit of Diana Ross breathiness, but otherwise she make Deena her own; she may get caught up in Curtis' schemes, but she has the backbone needed to break free.

As Lorrell, Kubbi makes this "middle child" an indelible presence, from the giggly fan-girl meeting her idol to a woman fed up with a relationship that has been seven years of promises and lies.

But the revelation is Douglass. Effie is the showiest role in the show, but Douglass' performance is well-grounded — the confidence and attitude she shows at the start makes the moments when that bravado cracks all the more wounding. And she delivers the show's signature song, "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going," with such heartfelt passion and soaring vocals that it brought the opening night audience to its feet (and director McLoud-Schingen wisely stopped the show's first act with that song, rather than blunting the impact with the song that usually ends the act).

McQuarters draws inspiration from such artists as Little Richard and James Brown for his portrayal of Early, and handles such numbers as the gospel-fueled "Fake Your Way to the Top" with great energy. Todd, as C.C., also has a fine voice, and one wishes his character was given more opportunities to show it off.

Ukabam makes for a good, single-minded, sort-of villain; his singing at Friday's opening night performance was worrisome — or maybe it was a way to show that his character only knew how to sell music.

Music director Christy Stalcup led the crackerjack seven-piece band; Deana Byford designed the sets and lighting; and Mandy Gross and Lisa Hunter collaborated on the costumes.

"Dreamgirls" continues through Oct. 17 at the Tulsa PAC, 110 E. Second St. For tickets: 918-596-7111, **tulsapac.com**.

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