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## Cast of 'Dreamgirls' takes on iconic roles in Theatre Tulsa production

James D. Watts Jr.

Oct 3, 2021

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Kubbi plays Lorrell, Majeste Pearson is Deena 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."

Courtesy PHOTOS, Josh New

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James D. Watts Jr.

**E**veryone wants to be Effie.

Effie White is one of the principal characters in the musical “Dreamgirls,” who starts out as the lead singer in a trio of childhood friends who hope to hit it big in the music business as a vocal group called the Dreamettes.

But Effie’s personality, which is as outsized as her powerful voice, runs afoul of the men who are wanting to use the young women to make their own dreams of success come true. And soon Effie is pushed out — out of the spotlight, then out of the group now known as the Dreams, then out of her relationship with the man who professed to love her.

In the face of all these betrayals, all this heartbreak, Effie’s volcanic emotions erupt into a single song, with the defiant title of “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going.”

And it’s because of that one song — which made an unknown Jennifer Holliday a star when she performed it in the original Broadway production — each of the women starring in Theatre Tulsa’s upcoming production of “Dreamgirls” feel a unique kinship with the character of Effie White.

“My mother took me to see the show when it was still on Broadway,” said the actress who goes by the mononym Kubbi. “And I starting using ‘And I Am Telling You...’ at every audition I’ve ever done. It just spoke to me so strongly.”

Majeste Pearson agreed. “That song, it just gets to folks,” she said. “The first time I heard it, I just connected with the character of Effie, because so many of us have gone through something like that, and have had those kind of feelings.”

Kubbi and Pearson, however, have been cast as the other two members of the Dreams. Pearson, who starred in Theatre Tulsa’s production of “Ragtime” and was a contestant on the reality series “The Four,” plays Deena Jones, the sleek, ambitious singer determined to rise from the concert stage to the silver screen.

Kubbi, a New York City-based actor and director whose career has included performing at the Grand Ole Opry, The Apollo Theatre, Caroline's on Broadway, The Producer's Club and New York's Public Theatre, portrays Lorrell, whose efforts to hold the Dreams together often go unappreciated.

DeVon Douglass, who served as chief resilience officer for the City of Tulsa for several years, has the role of Effie in Theatre Tulsa's production, which opens Oct. 8 at the Tulsa PAC. But her introduction to "Dreamgirls" signature song took a more circuitous path.

"I saw a film called 'Camp,' about kids attending a musical theater camp, and one of the characters sang that song," she recalled. "And I remember telling my auntie about this incredible song that I was certain she had never heard before. She just looked at me and said, 'Girl, you don't know what you're talking about.' She got out her record of the musical, and said I had better listen to this.

"It was a little like homework, but I felt instantly attracted to Effie," Douglass said. "It was more than the fact that I identified with her as a chunky little girl. Her character, and that song, contain lessons that I continue to draw upon today."

Theatre Tulsa's production of "Dreamgirls" is directed by Kelli McCloud Schingen and choreographed by Mecca Marie. Christy Stalcup is the music director.

The cast also features Obum Ukabam, Nash McQuarters, Graceson Todd, Dion Berryhill, Cornelius Johnson, Justin Daniels, Dionne Lambert, Oti-Lisa Brown, Mecca Marie and Kimberly Martin.

"Dreamgirls," written by composer Henry Krieger and playwright/lyricist Tom Eyan, draws from the history of numerous vocal ensembles, the so-called "girl groups," of the 1950s and '60s, although the storyline and characters owe a major debt to the history of the Supremes, which started out with Florence Ballard as the group's lead singer before Motown head Barry Gordy Jr. decided to focus attention on Diana Ross, to make her the star.

The musical also details the cut-throat world of the music business, as Black artists had to struggle and compromise to get their music heard, whether by bribing radio stations to play certain records, or smoothing out the rougher, more soulful aspects of the music to make it appeal to a white audience.

For the women portraying the Dreams, “Dreamgirls” is something more than just a show.

“Personally, I see parts of myself in every character,” Kubbi said. “The people who wrote these songs, they understood the struggle we women go through. But they also show the strength these women have to overcome those struggles and become better people because of it.

“That’s one thing that drew me to the role of Lorrell,” she said. “She’s a character that sometimes can get lost among all the other characters — when I told my twin sister that I was going to be playing Lorrell, she didn’t know who the character was. But Lorrell is a role that has a lot of substance to it, which I love, so I’m going to make sure everyone remembers who Lorrell is, and how she grows through the course of the show.”

“It’s really been a transformative thing, to be a part of this show,” Pearson said. “This show has such a powerful message about facing the challenges in life, and for me, it’s a chance to encourage young women and men to find their own voice and to make themselves heard.”

For Douglass, who is performing in her first stage musical since her high school days, taking on the role of Effie was an intimidating prospect at the start.

“It’s a challenge because you have to tap into your own experiences, and sometimes it’s almost impossible not to cry because it’s so personal,” she said. “It’s a big responsibility, and my prayer is to be able to do it justice.

“Fortunately, we have a great director, and I love the camaraderie that we’ve developed,” Douglass said. “And we have a lot of top-notch talent in this show — the male voices in this cast are just amazing. People are going to be proud of the sort of

show Tulsa can put on.”

“I think it is wonderful that we’re doing this show now, when it’s the 40th anniversary of it opening on Broadway, and that this company is presenting a show with a primarily Black cast, with a Black director, the year of the Tulsa Race Massacre centennial,” Kubbi said. “We’re making a little history of our own with this show.”

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