

Amid 'Dreamgirls' stars, Hudson sterling

By Kam Williams

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Generally speaking, this critic has been woefully underwhelmed by latter-day screen adaptations of celebrated Broadway musicals. The primary problem with the genre has been that, even as films, they still tend to look like stage productions thereby failing to take advantage of the array of spatial, temporal, visual, aural and technical enhancements suddenly made available by the shift to the cinematic medium.

Therefore, it's a very pleasant surprise to discover that "Dreamgirls" offers an experience that actually feels like you're watching a movie, not merely a taped version of what you've already caught in the theater.

Oscar-winner Bill Condon (for the script of "Gods and Monsters") earns considerable kudos in this regard, since he not only directs here, but wrote the screenplay based on the Tony award-winning play, which opened to critical acclaim 25 years ago.

Condon assembled a most impressive cast for the project, from top to bottom, including a number of marquee names capable of carrying a movie on their own: Academy Award-winner Jamie Foxx, Grammy Award-winners Beyonce Knowles, Eddie Murphy, NAACP Image Award-winners Danny Glover and Jaleel "Urkel" White to Tony



"Dreamgirls" cast features Jamie Foxx, Beyonce, adjacent, and Jennifer Hudson, right.

Award-winners Hinton Battle and Anika Noni Rose, to Emmy-winner John Lithgow.

Ironically, praiseworthy performances by all of the above were easily overshadowed by the spellbinding debut of a relatively unknown, "American Idol" contender — Jennifer Hudson, who came in seventh during the reality-TV series' third season.

You might remember her because her surprising elimination from the contest had prompted guest judge Sir Elton John to speculate that racism must have played a part in the results of the voting.

That's all water under the bridge now, because Hudson

manages to upstage even Beyonce in "Dreamgirls," bringing down the house as Effie Melody White, recreating the Tony-winning role originated on Broadway by Jennifer Holliday.

The corpulent crowd-pleaser got a standing ovation during the screening I attended, this in response to her spirited rendition of "And I Am Telling You."

Ostensibly inspired by the real-life story of The Supremes, this "Up from Nothing" saga, set in the Sixties, revolves around the trials and tribulations of the members of an all-girl singing group.

Beyonce plays Deena Jones (Diana Ross), while Rose plays Lorrell Robinson

(Mary Wilson), and Sharon Leal plays Effie's eventual replacement Michelle Morris (Cindy Birdsong).

The crib sheet of the storyline reads as follows: The Dreamettes, a promising

trio trying to sing their way out of the slums of Detroit, are discovered by Curtis Taylor, Jr. (Foxx), a Cadillac dealership fledgling manager who signs them as a back-up group for headliner James "Thunder" Early (Murphy).

After touring on the Chitlin' Circuit, the girls eventually hit the road on their own, seeking to generate crossover audience appeal as The Dreams, but not before full-figured Effie is pushed first out of the spotlight, then out of the group entirely in favor of the slimmer, more appealing Deena.

The Dreams go on to fame and fortune sans Effie, though she ultimately exacts a measure of revenge by launching a successful solo career.

What some might not know is that Effie died in the first version of the play, because the character had been carefully patterned after the ill-fated Flo Ballard. That Supreme, fired in 1967, spi-

raled down into depression and alcoholism before passing away prematurely while on welfare at the tender age of only 32.

Fortunately, the show's producers abided by Jennifer Holliday's request to put a positive spin on Effie's exit from the mythical Dreams, and the rest is showbiz history.

As a consequence, Dreamworks has a surefire hit on its hands, and Jennifer Hudson is the early favorite for an Academy Award.

Expect additional Oscar buzz to swirl around others in the cast and crew, especially Eddie Murphy, who enjoys his best outing since "Shrek," as a flamboyant composite James Brown and Marvin Gaye.

But make no mistake, this is Jennifer Hudson's coming out party.

Excellent (4 stars). Rated PG-13 for sex, expletives, and drug use.

Black comedy club owner welcomes N-word use

LOS ANGELES (AP) - In response to attacks on Michael Richards' use of the n-word during a performance at the Laugh Factory, the Black owner of another club has welcomed comedians who use the term.

"Someone had to stand up for comics and freedom of speech has to rule the day," said Enss Mitchell, owner of Comedy Union. "No matter if you agree or disagree with what someone says, you have to allow them the opportunity to say it."

Mitchell said he wasn't encouraging anyone to use the word but wanted to create an atmosphere in which performers feel comfortable talking about anything they want.

"This was not billed as 'N-Word Night.' Some comics used it, some didn't. I just wanted to make the point that it's a slippery slope when anyone wants to start banning a word," he said.

Laugh Factory owner Jamie Masada barred the word from his stage after Richards' Nov. 17 outburst in which he tar-

geted four Black patrons with a tirade of racial slurs.

Rev. Jesse Jackson and other Black community leaders later called for a complete end to the use of the word.

Mitchell said Friday's show at Comedy Union was well received by the audience and nobody complained about the language.

The show drew criticism from the Rev. Al Sharpton.

"It is amazing to me when we see acts of racism, when we see acts of injustice, when we see acts of war, clubs don't take an hour to fight that, but they want to have a fight for the right to call us [the n-word]," Sharpton said. "There's something sick about that."

Richards, who played the wacky neighbor Kramer on "Seinfeld," has been on a campaign of contrition for his performance at the Laugh Factory.

He has said the tirade was fueled by anger at being heckled and not by bigotry.



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