



HER VOICE: BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

Dream Girls

Bill Condon's *Dreamgirls* reaches the UK on a wave of nods and awards that includes Golden Globe wins for newcomer Jennifer Hudson and the film itself, and a raft of Oscar nominations. A dazzling musical – in the traditional sense – packed with A-list African-American performers, directed by the screenwriter of *Chicago* and based on a Broadway show about one of the most loved moments of US pop history, it's destined to make a huge splash. Inspired by the rise of Motown in the 1960s and 1970s, *Dreamgirls* reimagines the story of Berry Gordy's grooming of the Supremes for crossover stardom. Here all is superlative: the Dreams, like the Supremes, achieve a more powerful global presence than any female performers before; the spectacles are – well – spectacular; the star vehicles are plentiful.

At the film's centre are Effie (Hudson), Deena (Beyoncé) and Lorrell (Tony Award-winner Anika Noni Rose), who start as a singing trio headed by the beltingly powerful Effie, before becoming backing singers to soulman Jimmy Early (Eddie Murphy). Groomed by Rainbow Records mogul Curtis Taylor Jr (Jamie Foxx), they achieve massive crossover appeal, fronted by Deena. Jimmy, a composite of Marvin Gaye and James Brown with a dash of Little Richard and a sprinkling of Jackie Wilson, begins his career singing hot gospel-inflected R&B, his performances climaxing in a mock faint in the manner of the Godfather of Soul's histrionics. But Jimmy's trouble is that his act is too 'black', appealing only to the 'chitlin' circuit' of race-specific venues, record labels and radio stations. Even when he's made the crossover, he continues to shock white audiences with a style that's too sexualised. He is, however, the only one to address the political moment (fleshed out in troubling newsreel footage), with a recording that echoes Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On'.

Curtis (who starts the film as a Cadillac salesman) is a charming Svengali, moulding the Dreams for white cabaret audiences by eviscerating their 'soul' and excising their autonomy. His motivation is the well-rehearsed idea that the history of black artistic achievement is also a history of white theft. A jaunty song about a Cadillac penned by Effie's brother C.C. and released by Jimmy quickly makes it to the mainstream – but only when rerecorded by an anodyne white trio called Dave and the Sweethearts. It's a funny and distressing vignette, and as Curtis points out, there's a famous precedent: the first person to record 'Hound Dog' was black Big Mama Thornton, not white Elvis.

Cue the formation of Rainbow Records, a name that poignantly suggests the dream of a racially inclusive industry and audience. But in the process of promoting its roster of black performers, Rainbow changes them, losing the

edgy sassiness of C.C.'s songs and Effie's voice. Indeed Effie is too passionate a singer and too corpulent a physical presence to please crossover audiences, so Curtis replaces her with Deena, who has TV-friendly looks and a 'lighter sound'. Getting black acts into previously segregated locations also means they have to withstand heavy racism ('These are good people,' says a stand-up comic introducing Jimmy and the girls. 'They can sing, they can dance, they can even mop up afterwards').

Curtis, played by Foxx with clear-eyed steel, swiftly progresses to bigger markets and other choices, following his firing of Effie with a rejection of Jimmy's political album and the burial of Effie's solo record. Deena's mother confides in him that she never thought her daughter had much of a voice, to which Curtis replies: 'Deena has something better than a voice – she has a quality.' He even compares the invention of the Dreams to making 'a great sundae'.

However, *Dreamgirls* doesn't follow Curtis' example by diluting its own product. Though Beyoncé plays Deena, it's first-timer Jennifer Hudson who steals the show, and her character Effie whose story enables the film's moral conclusion. The segue from Effie's agonised protest solo, 'And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going', to the Dreams – minus Effie – in full-blown Caesar's Palace glamour mode reveals the film's ambivalence about Curtis' musical and emotional choices. This is not to say that the Dreams' staged set-pieces aren't entertaining, hilarious, and gorgeous too. But while Effie bears the cost, she is not excised from the audience's view: *Dreamgirls* gives us both an Aretha *and* a Diana.

This, then, is more of an ensemble piece than you might expect from the star billing of Foxx, Beyoncé and Murphy. No doubt the idea of playing a Diana Ross clone in a Hollywood vehicle was as attractive to Beyoncé as playing Billie Holiday in *Lady Sings the Blues* was to Ross herself. Yet *Dreamgirls*' fidelity to the story of the Supremes (in which Ross originally backed Florence Ballard before being promoted to front of stage) means that Beyoncé spends the first third of the film playing second-fiddle to a newcomer. Reportedly *Dreamgirls* initially stalled in pre-production when Whitney Houston wanted to sing both Deena *and* Effie's power-songs, and it's remarkable that a star as huge as Beyoncé risked being overshadowed, especially given Curtis' rationale for his promotion of her character Deena: 'I chose you to sing lead because your voice has no personality, no depth. Except for what I put in it.'

Up to this point Deena has accepted her passive position as modeller's clay, a tough call for a globally famous songwriting diva, even a relative newcomer to cinema (Beyoncé's film work to date has been limited to slight comic roles like Foxy Cleopatra in *Austin Powers 3: Goldmember*). But Deena rebels and is rewarded with the anguished torchsong 'Listen', which sounds more noughties than 1970s, presumably all the better to hit the singles charts.

Still, it is Hudson's performance that won the Golden Globe and Oscar nomination. An *American Idol* finalist (though not the winner), she has followed a trajectory that's remarkably similar to Effie's: a singer who failed to get first place but lands a more meaningful prize second time around. Then again, Deena's story of promotion from the ranks to star billing also reflects Beyoncé's own emergence from Destiny's Child to solo superstardom. Perhaps this is just the age-old story of the chorus girl who gets her chance in the spotlight filtered through the tale of the rise of the first globally successful black corporation.

Audiences of a certain age will take pleasure in spotting the lookalike elements of the main characterisations. Deena's hairstyle goes through all the phases of Diana's, and Beyoncé has clearly studied Ross' characteristic head movements as if she were swotting for an exam in Motownology. Rainbow Records' stable of acts features some hilarious soul parodies – including the Family Funk and the Campbell Connection, a five-piece act headed by a squeaky-voiced Jacksonesque boy. *Dreamgirls* positively fizzes with the fun it's having with these icons and their funky interiors, bell-bottoms and expanding Afros.

But perhaps the greatest pleasure comes from its honesty as a musical. The production numbers trip a well-judged line between nostalgic parody and full-blown splendour: great spangly extravaganzas of glam and glory, fireworks and frocks. Meanwhile musical shifts from gospel to soul to proto-funk tell the story of the cultural changes of those turbulent times. Even more engaging are the operetta-style moments when characters break into song and serenade each other as they did in classic Hollywood. *Dreamgirls* is that rare movie – a must-see, talking-point film with immediate appeal to all audiences. And not an action sequence in sight.

Linda Ruth Williams, *Sight & Sound*, March 2007

DREAMGIRLS

Directed by: Bill Condon
Presented by: DreamWorks SKG, Paramount Pictures
Executive Producer: Patricia Whitcher
Produced by: Laurence Mark
Co-producer: Jonathan King
Associate Producer: Leeann Stonebreaker
Unit Production Manager: Patricia Whitcher
2nd Unit Production Manager: David Witz
Production Supervisor: Don J. Hug
Production Co-ordinator: Brigitte Lester
Production Accountant: Gail Martin-Sheridan
Location Manager: Eric Hedayat
Post-production Supervisor: Joan Kelley Bierman
2nd Unit Director: Steven Jacobson
1st Assistant Director: Richard Graves
2nd Assistant Director: Eric Sherman
2nd 2nd Assistant Director: Renee Hill-Sweet
1st Assistant Director (2nd Unit): Mark Hansson
Script Supervisor: Lyn McKissick
Casting: Debra Zane, Jay Binder
Written for the screen by: Bill Condon
Based on the Original Broadway Book by: Tom Eyen
Director of Photography: Tobias Schliessler
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Dino Parks
Camera Operator: Colin Anderson
Camera Operator (B): Chris Moseley
Camera Operator (C): Dino Parks
Steadicam Operator: Colin Anderson
Still Photographer: David James
Visual Effects Supervisor: Gray Marshall
Special Effects Coordinator: Don Frazee
Graphic Designers: JC Brown, Eric Rosenberg
Edited by: Virginia Katz
Production Designer: John Myhre
Supervising Art Director: Tomas Voth
Set Designers: Luis Hoyos, Rich Romig
Set Decorator: Nancy Haigh
Property Master: Kirk Corwin
Costume Designer: Sharen Davis
Assistant Costume Designer: Carol Cutshall
Department Head Make-up: Tym Shutchai Buacharern
Key Make-up Artist: Judy Murdock
Make-up Artists: Martha Callender, Nicole Sortillon
Department Head Hairstylist: Camille Friend
Key Hairstylist: JoAnn Stafford-Chaney
Hairstylist: Brian Andrew
End Title Sequence Designed/Produced by: The Picture Mill
End Title Sequence Lead Designer: David Clayton
Music by: Henry Krieger
Songs Arranged and Produced by: Underdogs
Additional Music: Paul Rabjohns
Original Score: Stephen Trask
Additional Music: Deborah Lurie
Lyrics by: Tom Eyen
Conductor: Damon Intrabartolo
Choirmaster: Eric Dawkins
Orchestrations: Damon Intrabartolo
Music Arrangers: Harvey Mason Jr, Damon Thomas, Randy Spendlove, Matt Sullivan, Tim Carmon, Harvey Mason
Original Arrangements: Stephen Trask
Supervising Music Editor: Paul Rabjohns
Music Editor: Jason Ruder
Choreographer: Fatima Robinson
Choreographed for the Stage by: Michael Bennett
Co-choreographer: Aakomon ‘AJ’ Jones
Sound Designer: Richard E. Yawn
Production Sound Mixer: Willie Burton
Boom Operator: Marvin Lewis
Re-Recording Mixers: Michael Minkler, Bob Beemer
Supervising Sound Editor: Richard E. Yawn
Stunt Co-ordinator: Kevin Jackson
Unit Publicist: Guy Adan
Filmed at: Los Angeles Center Studios

Celebrating films starring and directed by
Black talent and more



Cast:
Jamie Foxx (Curtis Taylor Jr)
Beyoncé Knowles (Deena Jones)
Eddie Murphy (James ‘Thunder’ Early)
Danny Glover (Marty Madison)
Anika Noni Rose (Lorrell Robinson)
Keith Robinson (C.C. White)
Sharon Leal (Michelle Morris)
Hinton Battle (Wayne)
Jennifer Hudson (Effie White)
Mariah Wilson (Magic)
Yvette Cason (May)
Ken Page (Max Washington)
Ralph Harris (M.C.)
Michael-Leon Wooley (Tiny Joe Dixon)
Loretta Devine (jazz singer)
John Lithgow (Jerry Harris)
John Krasinski (Sam Walsh)
Alexander Folk (Ronald White)
Esther Scott (Aunt Ethel)
Bobby Slayton (Miami comic)
Jordan Wright (Teddy Campbell)
Dawnn Lewis (Melba Early)
Jaleel White (talent booker)
JoNell Kennedy (Joann)
Sybyl Walker (Charlene)
Lesley Nicole Lewis, Eboni Y. Nichols, Ariké Rice, Fatima Robinson (Stepp Sisters)
Aakomon ‘AJ’ Jones (Little Albert)
Barsheem Bernard Fowler, Anwar ‘Flii Stylz’ Burton, Tyrell Washington (Tru-Tones)
Rory O’Malley (Dave)
Laura Bell Bundy, Anne Warren (The Sweethearts)
Ivar Brogger (David Bennett)
Daren A. Herbert (Jimmy’s piano player)
Jocko Sims (Elvis Kelly)
Pam Trotter (Rhonda)
Cleo King (Janice)
Eddie Mekka (club manager)
Alejandro Furth (case worker)
Dilva Henry (TV reporter)
Vince Grant (American Bandstand producer)
Robert Cicchini (Nicky Cassaro)
Thomas Crawford (TV director)
Charles Jones (Carl)
Robert Curtis Brown (technical director)
Stephanie Owens (Tania Williams)

USA 2006
120 mins

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Amazing Grace
Mon 17 May 18:10; Sat 29 May 15:15; Tue 8 Jun 18:10
Whitney: Can I Be Me
Tue 18 May 20:50; Sat 26 Jun 18:10
Siren of the Tropics (La sirène des tropiques)
Wed 19 May 18:10; Sat 5 Jun 12:20
Stormy Weather
Wed 19 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 16:00
Dreamgirls
Sat 22 May 17:50; Wed 23 Jun 20:30
Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things
Mon 24 May 18:10; Sat 19 Jun 15:20
...But Then, She’s Betty Carter
Sat 29 May 12:10; Mon 7 Jun 18:00
Sparkle
Sun 30 May 18:40; Thu 10 Jun 20:35
Mavis!
Mon 31 May 16:10; Thu 17 Jun 20:40
Billie
Wed 2 Jun 18:00; Tue 15 Jun 20:40
What’s Love Got to Do with It
Fri 4 Jun 18:00; Sat 26 Jun 20:45
Twenty Feet from Stardom
Fri 4 Jun 20:45; Thu 10 Jun 18:20
The Wiz
Sun 6 Jun 12:20; Fri 18 Jun 17:45