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**The Legacy of
Michael Bennett:**

*A Chorus Line on Broadway
Dreamgirls on Film*



ALL YOU'VE GOT TO DO IS
DREAM

THE ROLE OF THEATRICAL
LIGHTING IN BRINGING
MICHAEL BENNETT'S
CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT
TO THE SCREEN

By: David Barbour



The re-emergence of the movie musical reaches a new level with *Dreamgirls*. The film is dramatically

different from its recent predecessors. Beginning with the explosion of stylish satire that was *Chicago*, none of the new films taken from Broadway tuners have made a claim on the audience's emotions. Indeed *Chicago*, with its biting humor, sleek visuals, and so-awful-they're-lovable heroines, arguably worked because viewers remained one step removed from the homicidal action.

Dreamgirls, released in mid-December by Dreamworks and Paramount Pictures, is something else altogether; it's a rangy melodrama that follows the changing fortunes of eight characters over the course of a decade that rocked America. It's a tale of multiple betrayals and forgiveness set against the rise of the Motown sound and the emergence of blacks as a significant force in American pop culture. And it's the story of starry-eyed young people who get a crash course in the malleable morals and shady ethics of the music business jungle.

Just to up the ante, *Dreamgirls* onstage was the crowning achievement of director/choreographer/force of nature Michael Bennett. Aided by Robin Wagner's moving scenery towers and Tharon Musser's non-stop lighting, Bennett staged the show with restless,

THE LEGACY OF MICHAEL BENNETT, PART II



ALL PHOTOS, EXCEPT WHERE NOTED, DAVID JAMES/OREAMWORKS-PARAMOUNT PICTURES

kinetic energy that mirrored the characters' unstoppable ambitions, their furious rush to success.

Dreamgirls is, of course, the story of three young women from Detroit who form the Dreamettes, a Supremes-style girl group. They're taken up by Curtis Taylor, Jr. (Jamie Foxx), a Cadillac dealer and all-around hustler, who sees them as a vehicle to break through pop music's race barrier. Curtis achieves his goal, building a music empire in the process, but the price is steep. He replaces Effie (Jennifer Hudson), the lead singer (and his lover), with the slimmer, prettier backup singer Deena Jones (Beyoncé Knowles), repositioning the group for mainstream success. Curtis drives Effie into a downward spiral while the group, renamed the Dreams, conquers the charts. But Curtis, who cheats his way to the top, overplays his hand, alienating Deena and destroying Jimmy Early (Eddie Murphy), the soul singer who can't remake himself into a crossover star.

In its ability to track multiple characters over the years, its keen awareness of America's changing racial politics and how it informed popular music, its portrayal of show business as a vehicle of social liberation, and in

its spectacular emotional punch, *Dreamgirls* is a classic—arguably one of the two or three best musicals of the last 50 years. (It certainly helped that Henry Krieger and Tom Eyer's score is a remarkable synthesis of Motown and Broadway sounds.) For years, making a film of it has seemed a daunting, even impossible, challenge.

Taking up that challenge was Bill Condon, the director of *Gods and Monsters* and *Kinsey*, and the screenwriter, who, after decades of discarded scripts by some very big names, cracked the problem of adapting *Chicago*. His work on *Dreamgirls* astonishes on several levels. Aided by his design collaborators, he's endowed the performance sequences with a fabulous glamour that explains the irresistible lure of show business for the title characters. He's expanded the story's social canvas, including scenes of Detroit in flames from race riots and a white Miami nightclub audience recoiling when a black singer appears onstage. He's also managed to translate many of Bennett's most brilliant staging concepts into cinematic terms.

For example, Virginia Katz's restless, ruthlessly precise editing captures every downbeat of the opening sequence,

which introduces most of the characters backstage at a talent contest in a Detroit theatre, throwing them together through a fast-paced series of deals and double-crosses. Later, working with director of photography Tobias Schliessler, Condon recreates one of Bennett's finest moments, when Effie, at the climax of the volcanic torch song "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going," zooms out of view, erased by the entrance of the newly reconfigured Dream.

Condon isn't the only *Chicago* veteran to bring his expertise to *Dreamgirls*. Production designer John Myrhe is also on hand, as are theatrical lighting designers Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer. Best known for their work on Broadway, they've become key players in the new movie musical genre, pushing the use of theatre lighting to a new and more fundamental role in the design of musical films. Working with Schliessler in a collaboration that all three describe as unusually creative and collegial, they've given *Dreamgirls* a deep-down glamour that recalls the classic '50s works of the great director Douglas Sirk. *Dreamgirls* is a story about people who betray their closest friends to make it in show business, and, when you see the film's ecstatic visuals, you'll understand why.

The *Dreamgirls* tour

In some ways, the film posed an entirely new set of challenges to Fisher and Eisenhauer. The musical numbers in *Chicago*, all of which were pretty much in the same Technicolor-noir style, were mostly shot in one theatre in Toronto. The numbers in *Dreamgirls* were shot on soundstages, in five downtown Los Angeles theatres, and a Pasadena church. In addition, each of the film's numbers chart another step in the Dreams' progress; they include the aging, dumpy Detroit Theatre; a Miami nightclub; Caesar's Palace; a TV studio; a jazz club, the Dorothy

Chandler Pavilion; an enormous gay disco, and the Detroit Theatre once again, now gorgeously refurbished for the Dreams' final appearance.

Thus, every scene required a different look, a different approach. In order to work out these all-important creative details, Fisher and Eisenhauer, brought in a little-known consultant: Deland.

In fact, Deland is the name of the non-existent electrician/designer who, in Fisher and Eisenhauer's imaginations, was attached to each venue where the Dreams appear. He's a kind of lighting everyman dreamed up by the duo as a way of spurring their creativity. As Eisenhauer explains it, when setting up the rig for in the Detroit Theatre, they asked themselves what Deland would do in a proscenium house with limited



equipment. For the Dreams' appearance in Miami, Deland now acquired a bigger budget and a higher level of expertise. And so it went, throughout the process of creating the lighting; in each venue, they asked themselves, what would Deland do?

Indeed, says Eisenhauer, "there's a big progression in the lighting. We had to show how the level of sophistication changed along the timelines of their careers. At the same time, in many cases, the lighting is also a scenic element." For this reason, Fisher adds, they strove to keep those units visible onscreen in period: "We also had to honor the history of theatre lighting; we tend to be serious about maintaining historical correctness. Bill Condon wasn't so concerned with that." Nevertheless, Fisher adds, Condon gave them an important design clue: "He stressed the idea that Curtis was a big influence on the Dreams' lighting, making it slicker."

That's not to say that the lighting design didn't employ modern technology. Eisenhauer notes that they

made considerable use of automated units, most of them from Vari*Lite. They were chosen, she adds, "for their precision, their quietness, and also because the look of the broad lens on VL5s and VL1000s mimics the general size of lens on conventional units."

Therefore, in the odd momenta when the units can be seen, they don't look distractingly contemporary. She adds, however, the moving lights don't perform any anachronistic pans or tilts: "You can move the lights only if the camera is moving, because then you won't notice it."

It's impossible to detail all the gear used in the film; however, in addition to approximately 450 Vari*Lite units, the various lighting rigs also included 24 Martin MAC 700s, a dozen Lycian 1293 followspots with infrared dichroic filters, and a mix of Lycian 1271 and 1272 followspots. In addition, about 150 Altman 360Qs, along with an antique carbon followspot, were refurbished to lend historical authenticity to the performance scenes.

To control the automated lighting units, the duo used several Virtuoso consoles; gear was moved from venue to venue as the shooting progressed.

Opposite page: "Steppin' to the Bad Side" recalls Robin Wagner's Broadway design. Left: Deena onstage. Above: Jimmy teaches a song to the girls.

Also used at different points in the process were two Strand 550i consoles, as well as two High End Systems Wholehog 3s. The theatrical lighting vendor was PRG, with accessories and hardware provided by City Theatrical.

The process of moving from theatre to theatre, loading in and out, and moving on to the next, was a big part of the job. We called it the *Dreamgirls* tour," says Eisenhauer.

One night only

As they moved from venue to venue, the business of each musical number became its own mini-production. Schliessler says the process began with rough staging concepts worked out in a studio setting with a few minimal lighting ideas that were captured on video. These, says Schliessler, "basically gave Jules and Peggy a palette to work with, then they'd go in with their creative hats on."

Then, says Eisenhauer, she and Fisher would spend a week designing a plot. After drawings were completed and the theatre equipped, they'd move in and program a set of cues. "Then," Eisenhauer continues, "we'd show a

proposed scheme with dancers onstage. We'd do camera tests from different angles." Condon and Schliessler would make suggestions and changes would be made. "By the end of the day," says Fisher, "with Peggy calling cues, they'd shoot the number." The designers constantly checked the dailies to track how the lighting showed up on film.

Schliessler says that much of his work with Fisher and Eisenhauer on

these sequences involved finding the right light levels. "Bill, John [Myhre], Jules, Peggy, and I would watch the scene live; then there would be notes from Bill. After that, I'd spend the day with Jules and Peggy, setting the levels. For me, the question always was, how was I going to get their looks on film? To get a certain color, you need a certain exposure, which is where my expertise came in. Also, because theatrical lighting is basically designed toward the audience, sometimes I would add in a little bit more till from the side."

Schliessler adds that he shot 75% of the film on 500 ASA Kodak Edition stock, using another stock, with a slightly lower ASA rating, for some daytime exteriors. Therefore, the distinct looks of each scene were achieved largely through lighting. (Fisher notes, and Schliessler concurs, that the film's palette progresses from hot, saturated colors at the beginning to cooler pastels as the characters become richer and more alienated. Similarly, in Myhre's production design, the rooms the characters inhabit keep getting more expansive until they seem lost, almost diminished by their own wealth.)

Left: "It's All Over," leads directly into "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" (above). Opposite: The amateur contest.



To illustrate the complexity of the design process, Eisenhauer examines a still photo from the film, showing a side view stage of the Detroit Theatre during the talent show sequence. "Here," she says pointing at a pair of overhead strip lights, "are some units that we found when we moved into the theatre." She indicates at a row of lights placed along each floor of the dressing rooms. "These were specified by John Myhre as part of his production design," she says. Next, she singles out some large overhead fixtures: "These were put there by Tobias to fill out the image and provide the necessary coverage." And of course, one can easily see the saturated greens and purples of the theatrical lighting.

Eisenhauer adds that the effectiveness of each image depends on the skillful blending of all these elements. Schlessler says, "There were three different levels of lighting that had to click together and combine. But that's the great thing with Jules and Peggy—they knew how to get their looks on film. They're so creative, those two; I get chills thinking about it. There was never a moment where I thought, they're not on my team."

Eisenhauer adds, "It's a situation for

which collaboration is not the right word. Generosity has to flow back and forth for it to work. It's not about controlling everything; it's about integrating into film lighting."

Presenting the Dreams

The opening sequence is one of the most complex in the film, as it establishes each character and his or her personality during the tumult of a live performance. During the action of the scene, we see several acts, including the girl group The Stepp Sisters; the blues singer Tiny Joe Dixon; the Dreams, with their first number "Move;" and, finally, their first appearance as Jimmy Early's backup singers. "We treated it like one extended opening number," says Fisher, and indeed the saturated colors and the presence of period lighting units in each shot add to the sequence's flavor.

Jimmy's next song, "Cadillac Car," is seen in a series of quick cuts as he and Dreams travel the country. When the number is co-opted by a white teen group, Curtis turns to payola, bribing disc jockeys to get Jimmy's next song on the charts. The number that follows, "Steppin' to the Bad Side," is unique, in

that it begins as a book number, then is seen in rehearsal, and is finally revealed as Jimmy's new hit song. The final portion of this sequence, performed by Jimmy and the Dreams onstage, pays homage to Robin Wagner's original stage design, defined as it is by a series of rising platform and side light towers covered with PAR cans and strip lights, with half of the units gelled in red.

In these numbers especially, the followspot work is particularly important. "The followspots were our tool of movement," says Fisher. Schlessler adds that these units "were a little hard to control sometimes, in terms of exposure," given the different skin tones of Eddie Murphy and the three Dreams. The DP found himself making half-stop adjustments depending on who was in the spotlight. "It was very intricate," he says; "Jules and Peggy found the most experienced spot operators in California," to keep things moving smoothly.

(Richard Tarczynski) was lead followspot operator, along with Louis Rogers and K.C. Illies. Other personnel included chief lighting technician John Buckley, film lighting programmer Scott Barnes, theatrical lighting gaffer Richard



PHOTO: ©DREAMWORKS/PARAMOUNT PICTURES



Top: *The Dreams*, without Effie, are launched. Bottom: *The Dreams*' farewell.

Mortell, key grip Mike Anderson, theatrical lighting coordinator Maximo Torres, and Vari*Lite technicians Jeremy Schilling and Melanie Daley. Harry Sangmeister was lead programmer, aided by Tom Celner, Richard Tyndall, and Matt Hudson. John Berger was art department liaison for theatrical lighting. Also key were production supervisor Don Hug and unit production manager Leanne Stonebreaker.)

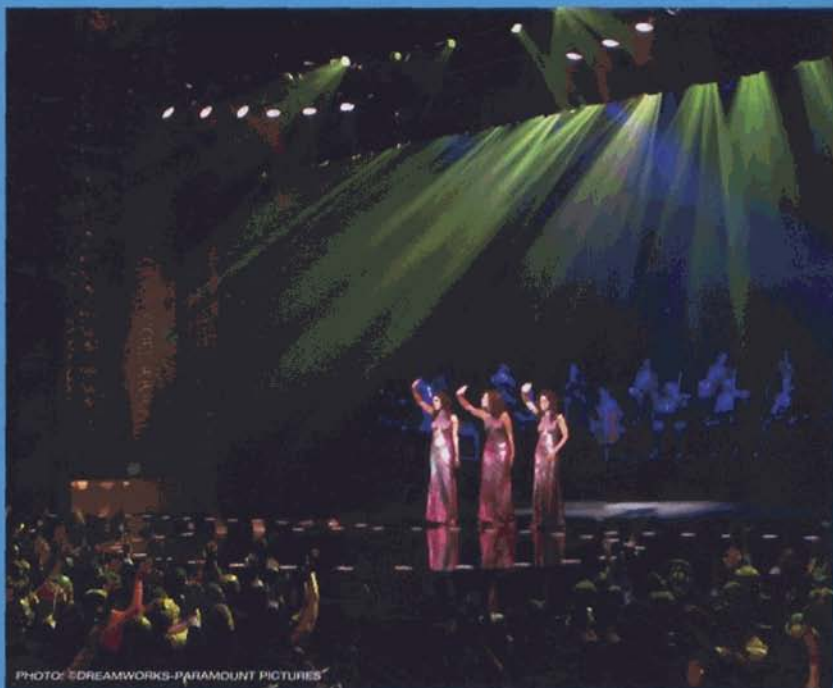
Circles provide a key visual motif in the film. *The Dreams* appear on circular stages in Miami and Las Vegas. Condon uses circular camera movements to heighten many scenes. "Family," the number in which Effie agrees to step down as the lead singer of *the Dreams* and sing backup, is set on the circular Miami stage, and the camera prowls around the characters as they come together in a circle. Then, when Curtis launches the *Dreams* as an act singing the title tune, they appear on the same stage, surrounded by hundreds of tiny starlights. The camera pans around the singers so closely that the audience fades away, leaving the trio at the center of their own universe. It's a moment of pure pop rapture.

In this sequence, says Fisher, Myhre "didn't want little stars; he wanted them to have a certain diameter. We got a number of star drops, but they weren't what he wanted." Schliessler adds, "We spent weeks in preproduction testing that shot. We tested 20 different versions of lightbulbs; [Condon] wanted the background to go black and become like the universe." Eisenhauer says that the bulbs they chose gave off an overly

warm light. Fisher says the bulbs were dipped in a Rosco blue, which gave them the necessary coolness.

A few scenes later, the loving circle seen in "Family" becomes a circle of betrayal in "It's All Over," in which Effie is fired from the *Dreams*. This scene is set on the circular Caesar's Palace stage, against a mirrored background, and again the camera arcs around the characters, capturing them in tense, uncomfortable close-ups while they bare their grievances. This leads directly into "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going," in which Effie is seen largely against a black backdrop; as in "Dreamgirls," she is isolated by the camera, but this time the number is a howl of agony, cut off at its peak by the appearance of the new *Dreams*.

Another 360° shot signals Effie's redemption in "I Am Changing," which she sings when she gets on the comeback trail. Myrhe's set is a tiny club on top of a Chicago building; it appears to be a former atelier, with an upstage wall and ceiling of glass panes. Effie, auditioning in the afternoon for a manager who doesn't want to hear her, begins the number; the camera pans her closely as she sings; when the



camera's movement ends, it's nighttime, the stage lights are on, and she has the audience in the palm of her hand. Once again, Fisher and Eisenhauer consulted with the phantom Deland, imagining how a local electrician would light the act; they heighten the effect of the song, by progressively illuminating rows of PAR cans, gelled in saturated colors that recall the film's early sequences.

The film's most apparent homage to the Broadway show comes in the disco version of "One Night Only." Deena and the Dreams appear at a gay club on a stage backed by a wall of lights—a look that recalls Musser's Broadway conception. Here, Fisher and Eisenhauer depart from strict historical accuracy, as the units are Vari*Lite VL5s, which didn't exist in the 1970s. However, they remain stationary and, the designers feel, the anachronism will be apparent to only a few. "John Myhre asked us for a wall of light," says Fisher. "We could have done it with PAR cans, but this us more control." There's a striking rainbow chase across the wall that adds to the scene's excitement. Schliessler says, "That was definitely tricky. Fortunately, I know how much I can get away with in terms of overexposure. I dimmed the units to the place where it looked real, yet still worked on film." He adds that much of his work with Fisher and Eisenhauer was "about adjusting things 5% more or less. Because their units were programmed into the console, we could fine-tune things by tiny percentages."

The coup de grace comes in the final sequence when, all scores settled and destinies determined, the Dreams hold their final concert, and Effie appears with them again after years of estrangement. The three

Dreams rise up on elevators and step downstage to the small circular thrust, which is lined by in-floor units that light up one by one. Behind them is a mirrored drop, creating the disorienting feeling that the singers are surrounded by the audience. Effie joins the Dreams for the final number, accompanied by circular camera movements, intercut with shots of Curtis making a discovery that upends his life (not to be revealed here). As the camera pulls back, the mirrored wall has been replaced with a gold beaded curtain, behind which one can see musicians. Just as one is taking in this visual shift, the number ends in an explosion of gold confetti. It's a delirious expression of diva worship that brings

the story to a ravishing close.

Everyone interviewed for this story emphasizes the uniqueness of Condon's vision. Fisher notes that the director is a theatre fan who attended the opening night of *Dreamgirls*. "Bill had a complete vision of what he wanted to achieve," says Schliessler. "I came in three or four months before we began shooting and saw that there were so many levels to this movie. But in one respect it was easy, because, when I have someone who knows what he wants, then I can deliver it. If I'm put his vision on film, then I've done my job." It's a sentiment with which, one imagines, Fisher and Eisenhauer are in deep agreement. ■



"One Night Only" is staged in front of a wall of Vari*Lite VL5s, a look that recalls Tharon Musser's conception for the same number in the original Broadway production.