

DREAM GIRLS

Book and lyrics by Tom Eyen; Music by Henry Krieger
Savoy Theatre, London

Reviewed by Jarlath O'Connell

Why has it taken this show 35 years to transfer from Broadway? It's a mystery, but it has arrived and is sensational. *Glee* star Amber Riley does not just star in it she owns it, and elicits not one but two standing ovations mid-show. Whilst ovating is de rigeur on Broadway, London audiences have always been more reticent, but Riley appears to have changed that.

Dreamgirls is the story of a black female singing trio that rises from the ghetto to national fame during the '60s. Like The Supremes, to whom they share more than a passing resemblance, The Dreams have their share of obstacles to overcome. By the end of Act 1 their hard driving manager Curtis (a dashing Joe Aaron Reid) informs Effie (Riley), who is both his lover and the group's best singer, that she is through. He's concluded they need to depart the ghetto of R&B for the sunlit, white and far more lucrative uplands of pop. Effie doesn't fit the bill, she's big in stature and in voice, so he promotes instead the pretty and svelte Deena (a solid Liisi LaFontaine).

Effie's response is the operatic 'And I'm Telling You I'm Not Going'. This song has attained a calling-card status for

black soul singers, an *X-Factor* anthem to affirmation, which is odd considering it's a song of debasement. Director Casey Nicholaw has the good taste though not to milk it and it emerges organically, almost creeping up on us. Riley proves a true artist though in that she communicates everything through the song. Her sheer talent lifts what could otherwise have been merely a collection of sassy poses.

The group start out as backing singers for James Brown-like character Jimmy Early. Adam J Bernard plays Jimmy as if his somebody was after him with a gun. This firecracker of charisma whelps, drops into the splits with effortless ease and has a razor sharp wit. It is a star making performance. Early is of course "too black" for the supper clubs of Miami Beach and Curtis' attempts to get him to tone down prove more than he can bear. Another victim is the group's songwriter CC White (Tyronne Huntley). In a wittily staged sequence we see one of his hits get Pat Boone-ified for the TV audience.

It's testament to the brilliance of Michael Bennett's original conception of the piece that he was able to com-

bine sold gold entertainment with a deft exploration of the cultural assimilation going on in the music business at the time. The business was also riven with payola scandals. Tom Eyen's great book also sensitively maps the destructive impact of show business life on both marriages and friendships.

In a wonderful fusing of art and life two opposing visions for black music, R&B vs pop/disco, fight it out in the show's hit number 'One Night Only'. Angered by CC and Effie's refusal to back down Curtis seeks to destroy them by rushing out a dance version of the song to do battle with Effie's more traditional take.

The show, in constant motion, has no naturalistic settings yet Tim Hatley's designs and Hugh Vanstone's lighting are pivotal to its success. Gregg Barnes' costumes too, revel in the journey from 50's primness to early 70s Day-Glo. We get every possible permutation also on the 'glitter slash' curtain, reaching its apotheosis with a blue-tinted diamanté example, in the shape of an arch. You might as well have arrived at the Pearly Gates.

This is a show that will require re-
viewing. ★