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January 09, 2007

"And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going..."

Even before its highly anticipated opening, the glitz-and-glam celluloid fest known as *Dreamgirls* was already blasting headlines left, right, and center. But let's not forget who created this project—Michael Bennett.

By Kimberly Gadette

Even before its highly anticipated opening, the glitz-and-glam celluloid fest known as *Dreamgirls* was already blasting headlines left, right, and center. Feverish reports escalated daily: Is there a catfight between Beyoncé and Jennifer Hudson? Will the Oscar buzz for Eddie Murphy last? Is *Dreamgirls* really based on Berry Gordy, Diana Ross, and the Supremes?

But with all this whirl of Motown costume and camp, let us not forget who created this project—a dancer-choreographer-director born in 1943 in Buffalo, N.Y., the son of a Russian-Jewish mother and a Sicilian-Catholic father—Michael "Mickey" Difiglia, a.k.a. Michael Bennett.

He was dancing by the age of 2. Young Michael worked on his choreographic skills by plotting out stage patterns for dancers using his brother Frank's marbles. By 18, he was a dancer on Broadway; five years later he was a fully credited choreographer. In 1971, with Stephen Sondheim, Hal Prince and James Goldman, he cocreated *Follies*. In 1975, he gave us the legendary *A Chorus Line*, followed by the 1981 groundbreaking hit *Dreamgirls*.

He learned his craft firsthand from the theatrical gods, from dancer and choreographer legends Jerome Robbins, Michael Kidd, Marge and Gower Champion, Agnes DeMille, and Bob Fosse. He worked with Hal Prince and Stephen Sondheim. But unlike his idols who reigned over the Broadway theater for decades, with plenty of time to create their lasting legacies, Bennett died of AIDS-related cancer at 44.

In 1983, Bennett said, "The Actors Fund wanted to give me their award for lifetime achievement, and I said don't give it to me—I don't want it. I'm only 40! This isn't my life's work yet."

Given his constant exploration of mortality—the death of a career equaling death itself—perhaps he heard the whispering of his own ghosts; perhaps he saw something else in his mirror other than a youthful twin waving back at him. That mirror was a recurring theme in Bennett's work. Not merely a theatrical device that he frequently incorporated into his stagings, Bennett's mirror reflected memory, longing, denial, and distortion, particularly in his three seminal works of *Follies*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Dreamgirls*.

Set on a mirrored, multi-angled raked stage, the legendary number of "Who's That Woman" from *Follies* became a high point in Bennett's then-rising career: Older women sing the tangled duet with younger counterparts, who wear mirrors embedded in their costumes. From a plain opening solo, the song escalates into a nightmarish whirl of discordance as age and realization come bearing down on the elderly actress who was once a "somebody."

The character of Cassie in *A Chorus Line* begs back into the chorus after her solo performance career has failed. Cassie's big number is a tour de force performed in front of whirling mirrors that incorporate the audience. The irony is that with this stellar performance of "The Music and the Mirror," Cassie is pleading to return to the fold as a faceless chorine. Though the audience can obviously see that she's a star, they also know that any chance at true fame has already eluded her.

And then there's the stage production of *Dreamgirls*. In the act 1 closer, as Effie White bellows out her declaration of "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going," she is vanquished by a wall of mirrors as the *Dreamgirls* overtake the stage. In an echo of what happened to Supremes singer Florence Ballard, Effie is cut from the act by her manager/lover because she is physically and vocally too overbearing: Effie, again reflecting Ballard's life, dies nearly destitute in her early 30s. But actress Jennifer Holliday, who played Effie in the original Broadway production, refused to go along with her character's death in the script. Since Bennett couldn't find a satisfactory replacement for Holliday, he relented and gave Effie a second chance. With 11 Tony nominations resulting in six Tony awards, including Best Choreography for Bennett, Best Actress for Holliday and Best Book for writer Tom Eyan, the musical's happy ending paralleled an even happier ending for the production itself.

Flash-forward to 2006 and the excited hype-hype-hooray of the film *Dreamgirls*. Written and directed by openly gay Bill Condon, who was in the last row of the top balcony on the opening night of *Dreamgirls* in December 1981, he has dedicated the film to Bennett. As he should. Not only is it important to remember Bennett, but to be reminded that nearly 20 years after his death, the disease that ended his life continues to take countless others.

- Like Effie in *Dreamgirls* screaming her guts out as she refuses to give up her dreams;

- Like the beautiful young ghosts in *Follies* haunting the Broadway theater;

- Like those hopeful dancers in *A Chorus Line* kicking endlessly as the lights fade out;

May our reflection of the legacy of Michael Bennett go on and on. No fade out, if you please.

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