

Often funny, always entertaining, *Dreamgirls*, a large, satisfying production, filled Chico State's Laxson Auditorium with music and good humor while raising questions about the cultural emasculation of show business.

Created by Michael Bennett of *A Chorus Line* fame, the Broadway musical swept the 1982 Tony Awards and went on to a four-year New York run. Monday night's show was produced by New York's Daedelus Productions.

Dreamgirls follows a black singing trio that rises from urban obscurity in the early '60s to national stardom a decade later. The play makes no effort to disguise the Dreams' (generally unflattering) resemblance to Diana Ross and the Supremes as it follows the singers through the trials of the music business.

As the Dreams "progress" from genuine Motown soul to discoified pop, searching for the ultimate crossover sound appealing to the white mainstream, they betray their art, each other and, implicitly, their heritage. Lost in the transition from heartfelt rhythm and blues to homogenized pap is everything that made them special.

The trio begins by singing backup behind R&B star Jimmy Early (Rondell Ryan) and eventually goes it alone, visions of the Chiffons in their minds.

Their first move toward the mainstream comes when manager Curtis Taylor (Daron Davis) relegates girlfriend and lead singer Effie White (Capathia Jenkins), who looks like Oprah but sings like Aretha, to backup in favor of the wispy Deena Jones (Tanesha Gary), who ends up with Taylor as well. White can't accept her role and is soon fired from the Dreams entirely.

Act Two switches back and forth between the glamorous Dreams and Effie, who records competing versions of the same songs, building the show to a climax.

Costuming was breathtaking—the Dreams' costumes evolve from ghastly flower-print dresses to shimmering gold and red lame' through the show's course, with (it seemed) several dozen outfits in between, each authentic and magnificent.

The show's choreography was fairly awful; outside of the Dreams' smooth motions, dancing was aimless and ineffectual. Luckily only a few scenes contained full-stage movement. Stage lighting was fine, but jerky, clumsy spotlighting often distracted and irritated.

Music from the production's traveling orchestra never overpowered the singing despite amplification difficulties, carrying the melodic songs with style.

From the rarefied atmosphere of Laxson's second-balcony general seating, the acting seemed typical of musicals—big, big, big. Most of the cast of 17 were competent when not singing and excellent when belting out seven-part musical dialogue and finger-snapping songs.

Standouts were audience favorite Capathia Jenkins, who ended the first act with a breathless, showstopping, "And I'm Telling You I'm Not Going" and added life and humor throughout; Daron Davis' commanding Curtis Taylor; and Rondell Ryan's sensational James Early, whose Jackie Wilson-type character whirls and sings through *Dreamgirls*. If Ryan's program biography—which lists him as a recent high school graduate—is accurate,

he's headed for stardom at a very early age.

Oddly, Tanesha Gary's Deena Jones was clearly the weakest singer of the four Dreams and didn't compensate with acting or stage presence. Perhaps that was a point of the show—that any thin, attractive singer could have had mainstream appeal with the right sound at the right time.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN



PURSUING THE DREAM Tanesha Gary plays Deena Jones, a character resembling Diana Ross, in the Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*. The touring version of the Tony-winning musical was presented in Chico Monday night.

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