

STAGE REVIEW

'Dreamgirls' Foxy With a Bite at Long Beach

By RAY LOYND

DREAMGIRLS at the Long Beach Civic Light Opera is so hot it feels new. Fans who want to get reacquainted, or anyone who missed the earlier incarnations of this sleek Michael Bennett musical (at the Shubert in 1983 and the Pantages last year), will find platinum at the company's Terrace Theater.

It's a white stretch limo of a production. This has always been a musical you look at more than you hear - the glitz and the ermine are a feast. But this time there's stronger balance among the singers, and the acting has an edge that you didn't sense at the Shubert. There's a sheen to the large cast that even the doo-wop wigs and tumbling silver Vegas curtains can't match.

As for takeoffs, who needs an overture when fever rises this fast? Right off we're into R&B trash and glitter backstage at the Apollo Theater in the early '60s. It's amateur night and the Dreamettes, three girls from Chicago with tacky wigs, are singing backup to a self-important soul singer. These first minutes are staged with such palpable flare that you hope the show doesn't go downhill. It doesn't. The Dreamettes, of course, soon become the famous Dreams, loosely, patterned by librettist Tom Eyan after the Supremes.

The production marks a startling debut for director/choreographer David Thomé, who acted in DREAMGIRLS prior to this non-performing leap. It's more than a case of keeping true to Bennett's vision, Thomé has re-lit his flame. And he's done it without a major figure like Jennifer Holliday, whose claque and one-woman thunder in the original show blurred the work of other cast members.

The Long Beach company, though, isn't lacking a star. On opening night, the volcanic finale, *And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going*, turned Cheryl Barnes, playing the dumped Effie White, into a buzzword at intermission. Her rendition soared up there with Holliday's. Opening-night ovations are usually reflex actions, but Barnes got (and deserved) the real thing.



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Vocally, Barnes' pain and power erupts with scorching rage ("What right do you have stealing my dreams!?" tightens your jaw). And dramatically she is even better than Holliday, not least because she is not so huge. Barnes may not physically bedazzle like her two buddies in the Dreams (played with loads of style and focus by Theresa Hayes and Connie A. Jackson). But it's not Effie's looks that get her in trouble.

Now the sting of her banishment from the group (forget she is being jilted, too) permits us to clearly see part of the real blame (and the show's social point): Effie's black sound does not fit in with the whitening "crossover" to pop from soul and rhythm and blues. Black ambition spells compromise.

The Dreams' dictatorial impresario is sharply delineated, with dangerous charm, by Tony Franklin. A roguish male singer who won't homogenize enough is wonderfully witty in the dexterous hands (and feet) of Phillip Gilmore. Rudy Huston's abused and used

songwriter is a staunch portrait. And Linda Lloyd adds texture as the replacement for the deposed Effie. Vocally, the willowy Hayes and the feisty Jackson are terrific complements for Barnes. Jackson is a knockout in the trio's third banana role because she has the sass that underscores the whole show.

LBCLO resident Steven Smith's musical direction (of Henry Kreiger's comparatively forgettable score, save that one great number) is exceptionally clear and classy. The production, staged much like a movie with montages and cuts and multicolored scrims, features the sets (Robin Wagner), costumes (Theoni V. Aldredge) and lights (Tharon Musser) from the 1987 Broadway revival of the show.