



Actors Tony Dawon, RaShawn Thompson and Rueben Echoles.

Photos courtesy of the Black Ensemble Theater

I Am Who I Am (The Story of Teddy Pendergrass)

In the history of recorded music, few voices have stood out more than that of Teddy Pendergrass. The rich, sensual sound delivered from his golden pipes is instantly recognizable, and Pendergrass classics like "Close the Door" and "Turn Off the Lights" set the romantic mode for a generation of lovers.

The legend of Pendergrass is the subject of the latest musical from Chicago's Black Ensemble Theater. "I Am Who I Am (The Story of Teddy Pendergrass)" made its Chi-Town debut last year and was instantly embraced by audiences and critics. Even Pendergrass, who was on hand for the world premiere, praised the show and its creator, the legendary Jackie Taylor, the founder and executive director of the Black Ensemble, who produced, wrote and directed the musical.

Now National Black Theatre Festival audiences will get to see what all the fuss is about. "I Am Who I Am (The Story of Teddy Pendergrass)" hopes to continue the Black Ensemble's streak of successful NBTF musicals.

"I Am Who I Am (The Story of Teddy Pendergrass)" is the highly uplifting and motivational story of the man behind the music that reminds us that with faith and determination absolutely nothing is impossible," said Taylor.

Philadelphia-born Pendergrass first gained fame as a member of Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, scoring hits like "I Miss You," "If You Don't Know Me By Now," "The Love I Lost" and "Wake up Everybody" throughout the 1970s. The hits kept on coming for Pendergrass when he went solo. He was at the pinnacle of his career on March 18, 1982, when his brakes failed and his Rolls-Royce hit a tree in a Philadelphia suburb. Pendergrass has been a wheel-

chair-bound quadriplegic ever since. But disability did not end Pendergrass' career. He recorded many more hits in the '80s and '90s, including "Joy" and "Hold Me in your Arms," which he recorded with a then-unknown Whitney Houston.

In addition to his many classics, "I Am Who I Am" features three new songs written by Pendergrass and his song-writing partner, Bill Jolly. Actor/singers Kevin McIlvaine and RaShawn Thompson share the role of Pendergrass. The cast also includes the talents of Carrie, Tony Dawon, Ati Kin D' Hayes, Rueben Echoles, Kristy Johnson, Melanie McCullough, Dawn Mitchell, Dwight Neal, Rhonda Preston, Billy Simmons and Andre Wood. The Black Ensemble's Jimmy Tillman is the musical director of the show, which includes the design team of Glendar Howard (costumes), Carl Ulaszek (set), Denise Karzewski (lights), Ron White (sound) and Razor Griffith (stage management). The live musicians who will provide the music include Musical Director Tillman (drums), Musical Arranger Thomas Washington (piano), Rick Hall (guitar), Bernard Reed (bass), Hank Ford (tenor saxophone), Paul Howard (trumpet) and Bill McFarland (trombone).

The Black Ensemble Theater Company is an NBTF favorite. It brought the blockbuster "The Jackie Wilson Story, My Heart is Crying ... Crying" to the 2001 and 2005 festivals, where it broke NBTF box-office records. "Somebody Say Amen: Great Women of Gospel," "Doo Wop Shoo Bop" and "Don't Make Me Over, In Tribute to Dionne Warwick" have also been served up to NBTF audiences by the Black Ensemble.



Kevin McIlvaine as Teddy Pendergrass.

**Aug. 6 at
8 p.m.
Aug. 7 at 8 p.m.
Aug. 8 at 3 & 8 p.m.
at K.R. Williams
Auditorium**

**Ticket Price:
\$42**