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## Musical *I Am Who I Am*, Charting the Rise of Pendergrass, Begins March 7

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Teddy Pendergrass

The Black Ensemble Theater's world-premiere musical, *I Am Who I Am (The Story of Teddy Pendergrass)* — produced, written and directed by the Chicago troupe's founder, Jackie Taylor — begins previews March 7.

Soul singer Pendergrass and co-writer Bill Jolly penned three new songs for the original musical about the life of the performer who has risen above his physical limitations. The production will officially open March 15.

Kevin McIlvaine and RaShawn Thompson share the title role of Teddy Pendergrass; the cast also includes Carrie, Tony Dawon, Ati Kin D'Hayes, Rueben Echoles, Kristy Johnson, Melanie McCullough, Dawn Mitchell, Dwight Neal, Rhonda Preston, Billy Simmons and Andre Wood.

"*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," writer-director Taylor stated. Pendergrass and Jolly's

new songs include "I Am Who I Am," "This Far By Faith" and "A Mother's Love."

Pendergrass gained recognition with Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes in 1972. His voice helped push the group to national success with hits like "I Miss You," "If You Don't Know Me By Now," "Bad Luck," "The Love I Lost" and "Wake Up Everybody," to name a few. In 1977 he went solo with his raw soulful style.

He was the first African-American singer to sell five platinum albums in a row ("TP" and "This Is Teddy Pendergrass," which produced hits like "Close the Door," "Turn Off the Lights" and "Joy").

In 1982 Pendergrass was injured in a car accident, which left him paralyzed from mid-chest down. After a year of therapy he started recording again — signing a lucrative record deal with the Elektra-Asylum label. The first single in 1984, "Hold Me in your Arms," was a duet with a teen-age Whitney Houston. He would go on to hit the charts with such classic as "Love Language" and "Truly Blessed."

Jimmy Tillman, Black Ensemble Theater's musical director, serves as musical director for *I Am Who I Am (The Story of Teddy Pendergrass)*, and Thomas Washington serves as musical arranger. Musicians include Tillman (drums), Washington (piano), Rick Hall (guitar), Bernard Reed (bass), Hank Ford (tenor saxophone), Paul Howard (trumpet) and Bill McFarland (trombone).

The design team for *I Am Who I Am (The Story of Teddy Pendergrass)* includes Glendar Howard (costumes), Carl Ulaszek (set), Denise Karzewski (lights), Ron White (sound) and Razor Griffith (stage management).

*I Am Who I Am* plays the Black Ensemble Theater, 4520 N. Beacon Street, Chicago.

For more information call (773) 769-4451 or (312) 902-1500, or visit [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com) [www.BlackEnsembleTheater.org](http://www.BlackEnsembleTheater.org).

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