

t h e a t e r

# Billy belts it out

An actor with a miraculous voice, Billy Porter has come a long way from Pittsburgh to a one-man show in New York. And now the *Broken Hearts Club* star is also fully out and proud **By Gerard Raymond**

**P**icture a 13-year-old kid washing dishes in the kitchen on a Sunday night in June. Suddenly he has a vision of God: It's Jennifer Holliday singing "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" at the 1982 Tony Awards on television. Although Billy Porter had been steeped in religion ever since he started singing in a Pittsburgh Pentecostal church at age 4, he says he discovered his "true ministry" when he first experienced that show-stopping moment from the Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*. "I didn't have a *Wizard of Oz*—there are no black people in that show," explains the 35-year-old performer and recording artist. "Jennifer Holliday was my Dorothy!"

Porter's *Dreamgirls* epiphany is just one of the dramatic highlights of his new solo show, a musical memoir titled *Ghetto Superstar (The Man That I Am)*, which commences a six-week engagement at the Public Theater's Joe's Pub in New York on February 10. In the show, for which he also wrote the text and a good portion of the music, Porter charts a course through the ups and downs in his career—Broadway credits that include *Miss Saigon*, *Grease*, and *Smokey Joe's Café*; a record contract that "crashed and burned"; and his movie breakthrough in the gay-themed *The Broken Hearts Club*. He also navigates the turbulent waters of his childhood abuse and traumas. But the proud testimony of his "spiritual, sexual, and musical odyssey" is the ringing affirmation of a song called "I'm a Black Broadway Bitch From the Ghetto."

"It was always the voice," Porter recalls. "I started singing in church, and that was what got me attention."

That voice would later be hailed by

one of his mentors, outgoing Public Theater director George C. Wolfe, as one that comes along only once in every generation of American musical theater performers, "informed by the influences of gospel, rhythm and blues, and Broadway."

But after Porter realized his dreams of making it on Broadway and landing a record contract, that unique voice combined with his ebullient personality had drawbacks as well. Showbiz producers drawn to his flamboyant, over-the-top dynamic didn't see him in any other context. "I sing like a black woman, you know, so whenever they wanted to stop a show they'd call Billy," Porter says. "They didn't want to know anything else about me. And I needed nourishment."

Porter's first album, *Untitled*, was not a success. "The music industry doesn't really know what to do with gay people," he says. "It's OK if you are extreme in some way, if you are a Boy George or an Elton John."

The little compromises one has to make gradually add up, Porter continues. "All of a sudden, five years later, there is this mountain of denial, and you are a shell," he says. "I felt like I was bamboozled." Eventually, the performer decided to embrace his Broadway roots and his love for gospel music and in 2003 put together a show with a title that captures where he stands musically: *At the Corner of Broadway and Soul*. A live recording of that show, taped at Joe's Pub, the venue for *Ghetto Superstar*, will be released in February.

Porter's film career got a boost with his scene-stealing turn as the campy, show tune-loving sidekick in *The Broken Hearts Club*, the 2000 gay buddy flick. (His most recent screen appear-



ance was in the Susan Sarandon and Robin Williams Christmas movie, *Noel*.) But he points out a double standard for gay actors: "For a gay story of importance, it's more exciting and interesting to get some straight actor of note to 'stretch.' Nobody is interested in me stretching in the opposite direction, although I can."

The impetus to write *Ghetto Superstar* grew out of his frustration with where his multiple careers were leading, Porter says: "I needed to figure out how not to complain and fix it myself."

He decided to write a showcase for his talents and be as honest as he could about himself. "It sounds simple on paper—to thine own self be true—but it's been a long journey," he says. Part of this passage includes Porter's public embracing of his sexuality. Though he never hid being gay, his refusal to discuss it in the media kept him in the background of ensemble works like *Broken Hearts*.

"I have been running away from it for a long time, not wanting to stand on a mountaintop, but I have to," he says. "If I were able to see [*Ghetto Superstar*] at the age that I needed to see it, it would have changed my life. I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with that responsibility, but at some point you have to own it and you have to take it on."

In other words, look out for the black Broadway bitch from the ghetto. ■

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