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The cast of "Gotta Dance," the new Broadway-bound musical that begins previews Dec. 13 at Chicago's Bank of America Theatre. (Photo: Matthew Murphy)

AGE IS NO ISSUE WHEN YOU JUST 'GOTTA DANCE'

HEDY WEISS on December 8, 2015

"There are short-cuts to happiness, and dancing is one of them," wrote Vicki Baum, the woman whose book served as the inspiration for the movie and musical, "Grand Hotel." And that observation might well double as a guiding principle for the new musical, "Gotta Dance," which begins its pre-Broadway engagement Dec. 13 at Chicago's Bank of America Theatre.

Inspired by Dori Berinstein's 2008 documentary film about the debut of the New Jersey Nets' first-ever (and overwhelmingly female) senior hip-hop dance team, the show riffs on that true story as it homes in on 10 determined dreamers. All are 60 years of age and above, and they not only audition to dance at halftime for a

Margie Korshak, Inc. for Broadway In Chicago

major NBA team (and an audience of 20,000 fans), but abandon their familiarity with tap, salsa and swing to learn what is a totally new style of dance for them — hip-hop.

The musical features a book by Chad Beguelin ("Aladdin") and Bob Martin ("The Drowsy Chaperone"), lyrics by Neil Benjamin ("Legally Blonde"), and music by Matthew Sklar ("Elf"), with additional music by the late Marvin Hamlisch, who had begun work on the project before his untimely death in 2012. Directing and choreographing "Gotta Dance" will be Jerry Mitchell, whose most recent Broadway credits include the Cyndi Lauper musical, "Kinky Boots," and the Gloria and Emilio Estefan show, "On Your Feet." Berinstein has teamed with Chicago-bred Bill Damaschke to produce the show.

Members of the cast of "Gotta Dance" (with Georgia Engel center), the world premiere musical set for its pre-Broadway engagement at the Bank of America Theatre. (Photo: Matthew Murphy)

'GOTTA DANCE'
When: Dec. 13, 2015 – Jan. 10, 2016
Where: Bank of America Theatre, 18 W. Monroe
Tickets: $38 – $105
Info: (800) 775-2000; www.BroadwayInChicago.com

The cast is a generation-spanning ethnic mix, with the "more mature" lineup including Andre De Shields, Stefanie Powers, Georgia Engel, Lillias White, Haven Burton, Lori Tan Chinn, and Nancy Ticotin. If a sneak peak of the show is any indication, Ticotin (an original member of Ballet Hispanico, and a member of the casts of "Jerome Robbins' Broadway" and "In the Heights"), might well steal the spotlight with her sensational dancing, partnered by a sexy "younger man," Chicago native Alexander Aguilar.

"This is a very arresting, as well as a very accessible human-interest story, and the cast is so full of reverence, respect and finesse," said the ever-charismatic DeShields, who will celebrate his 70th birthday in January, and

whose 47-year-long career includes memorable work on Broadway ("The Full Monty," "The Wiz," "Ain't Misbehavin'"), as well as at the Goodman Theatre ("The Jungle Book").

DeShields plays Ron, a 60-plus widower (he is a white man in the documentary) still grieving for his wife, who died two years earlier.

"He is mourning by withdrawing from life — just sitting on a couch in his basement watching TV," said the actor, who grew up in Baltimore as one of 11 children, graduated from the University of Wisconsin, initially came to Chicago to perform in "Hair," and then joined the Organic Theater Company founded by his college friend, Stuart Gordon. "Ron's story is a cautionary tale, because if you stop engaging in life, life will stop engaging with *you*. My character is hardly a fan of hip-hop; he met his wife swing dancing and dubs himself 'The Prince of Swing.' But he realizes he can celebrate his wife by getting back into life. I also happen to be the only man in this senior citizens hip hop group."

As for his own dancing, DeShields notes: "I'm a fan of the cultural revolution hip-hop has become. And I've been dancing all my life. So as they say, 'I can drop it like it's hot'. The challenge is that all my previous dance training has been about defying gravity, while in hip hop you put all the energy into the floor. I negotiate with my bones each morning, and as I've matured I've turned to yoga and spin cycling, which are easier on the joints."
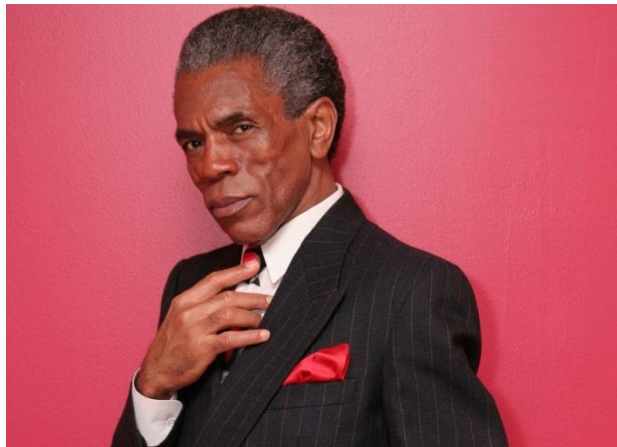
Andre De Shields is among the cast of the new musical "Gotta Dance," to have its pre-Broadway debut at Chicago's Bank of America Theatre beginning Dec. 13. (SUPPLIED PHOTO)

As for the leggy, ever-glamorous Stefanie Powers (known for her roles in such long-running TV series as "Hart to Hart" and "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E."), a friendship with director Mitchell was key to her arrival in "Gotta Dance."

"About a year after a London project with him fell through, I met him at an after-party for 'Kinky Boots' in Los Angeles," the actress (who is writing a blog about her experience in this show) recalled. "He said, 'I have

something for you and will be in touch.' And in a rare example of honorable behavior he proved to be a man of his word."

Without divulging too much about Joanne, the character she plays, Powers said: "She has a strong reason for being there, and thinks her decisions are for the good of the whole, but she sows the seeds of antagonism. My role was still evolving late in the process, with a dance number replaced by a song that I sang for the very first time to an invited audience. But part of the attraction of this project was to work on a new musical of such a grand dimension, and to have the rare opportunity to be the one to establish the character."

As it happens, a number of the actors also had the opportunity to meet their real-life counterparts.

Powers recounts the event: "On the pretext of doing some kind of promotional thing, Jerry [Mitchell] got us all together one afternoon and then surprised us by bringing in many of those who were in the documentary. My character is about 80 now, and she told me she stopped performing with the team because it was interfering with the running of her business."

Director Jerry Mitchell rehearses the cast of "Gotta Dance." | PHOTO BY DRAMATIC FORCES