

Ben Vereen is making s

Legendary singer, actor, dancer brings boundless energy to Mendel Center

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Ben Vereen recounts the story, some 45 years later, like it happened last week.

He was a young actor, starring as Judas Iscariot in the original stage production of "Jesus Christ Superstar," on Broadway, when there was a brisk knock on his dressing room door.

"The stage manager comes to my room and he says to me, 'You have an envelope,'" Vereen says by phone from New York City. "I said, 'Yeah? OK, give it to me.' He said, 'No, you have an envelope.' I said, 'Yeah, yeah just give it to me, man.' He hands me the envelope and it was from the Tony committee and it said that I had been nominated for a Tony. I looked at him and said, 'Who's Tony?' He told me what it was about, and he left the room and it hit me. My peers said, 'You've got something. Keep working at it.' And I got excited. I didn't win that year. But from those awards Bob Fosse called and asked me to come join the cast of 'Pippin' and the next year I won. I knew who Tony was by then."

Whether it's his Tony-nominated turn in the 1972 stage production of "Jesus Christ Superstar," the Tony-and-Drama Desk-winning performance as the Leading Player in Fosse's original production of "Pippin" the following year, the iconic, Emmy-nominated Chicken George in Alex Haley's groundbreaking TV series "Roots" in 1977, or more recent roles as Dr. Scott in last fall's TV remake of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," or the street-wise con man Porter in the Amazon series, "Sneaky Pete," Vereen has filled each character with such energetic ferocity that it is almost palpable.

IF YOU GO

What: "Steppin' Out" with Ben Vereen

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$35-\$65

Contact: 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

Artist info: www.benvereen.info

At age 70, Vereen stays active — from "Sneaky Pete," which has been renewed for a second season, and "Making History," a new TV series that debuts in May, to all-star performance galas such as the "Concert for America" in New York, and his own stage works, including "Steppin' Out," a cabaret-style theater piece of songs and stories representing various eras and elements of his career, which he performs Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

"It's a thank you to the audience for all of the years that you've stuck with me," Vereen says of the show. "It's all about people. This is what we've done along the journey, and I'm so grateful. I call it my gratitude show."

"Magic to Do," Stephen Schwartz's opening number from "Pippin," makes an appearance, and audiences can likely expect to hear other Schwartz numbers, such as "Defying Gravity," the Act I closer of "Wicked," although it's a song Vereen didn't sing during his several-month stint as The Wizard at the Gershwin Theatre. Every song, however, has been chosen because of a personal connection.

There's a medley of Vereen's early Broadway work, a salute to Frank Sinatra, including a version of "My Way," and a heartfelt tribute to Sammy Davis Jr. that features a rewritten version of "Mr. Bojangles." Vereen was the understudy to Davis in the



ABOVE AND ON THE COVER: Multi-talented singer, actor, dancer Ben Vereen brings his autobiographically-ins

1968 touring production of "Golden Boy."

"Steppin' Out" traverses these various autobiographically-inspired segments of song and dance interspersed with loving and sometimes hilarious anecdotes about the people who helped him along the way.

Growing up in Brooklyn, Vereen says he had no idea what awaited him on the other side of the Brooklyn Bridge up Broadway.

"My whole world was Brooklyn," he says. "To go to Brooklyn to Manhattan I thought you needed a passport to

get across the bridge. I knew nothing about the arts. In my neighborhood we didn't go to theater, you went to church."

A school principal suggested Vereen might find a home at the High School of Performing Arts where he says "the layers began to unfold."

"I walked into a room and there were a bunch of people who looked like aliens to my eyes," Vereen says. "I didn't know who these people were, but I was in front of Martha Graham and Jerome Robbins. To my young mind there was a difference here and

it's interesting and go find out about

The singer and the attention of launch Vereen's career in the 1967-68 touring production of "Sweet Charity."

"I was in the street me a suit and put r Vereen says, still a fortune. "They m didn't know who these people were, It was a whole new

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tion after being struck by a car in 1992.

Both at home and on tour, he carves out time in his schedule for children and students to talk about following their own creative path. On Saturday for example, he will teach a morning master class at LMC about untapped creative potential, and then work with the All God's Children Community Choir during an afternoon rehearsal for an on-stage collaboration of "Stand by Me" and "Give A Little Love" during the public performance later that night.

"They are our future," Vereen says. "Someone once said that if you give them what they need today, then tomorrows will be better for us. What I try to instill in young people is brilliance – the brilliance that they are seeking is actually seeking you. They have to find a way to be still and receive that by getting away from all the things that are put upon us. It's a pretty deep class. I'm passionate about it. I'm passionate about giving young people the tools that they need to make tomorrow great not only for ourselves but great for them, too. If we want to see a thriving youth we must give them the tools that they need and the arts is a viable tool that we need. In my Bible it says God *created*, it doesn't say God *manufactured*."

When asked about his schedule and his seemingly boundless energy, Vereen returns to his Brooklyn roots.

"My godmother and her husband were what I call these vagabond missionaries," he says "They didn't have their own church, but they would visit people in their home and go and take over someone else's church, that sort of thing. Time and time again, I would hear her testimony and she'd say, 'When I meet God, I want God to say you didn't rush out of life, you worked out of life.' I guess some of that rubbed off on me. I want to work out of life. I've been blessed to be put in this position to serve, and serve I will do."

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Photos provided

ired show "Steppin' Out" to the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre on Saturday night.

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Claude in the Tony-winning production of "Hair." Then came "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Pippin," although it was the role of Chicken George in "Roots" that made him a household name.

"You have to commend ABC for having the courage to put it on the air," Vereen says. "They got threats. The week that it showed, I stayed home and watched it like a lot of folks, but I had no idea of the impact that was happening all over the country. That Sunday, I was called because

Freddie Prinze left us too soon, and

they asked me to cover at the American Music Awards. I was doing my presentation with Merv Griffin and before we go out Merv turns to me and says, 'Congratulations.' I didn't know what he was talking about. The curtain opens and there's a standing ovation so I turn to Merv and applaud Merv. Merv says, 'No, that's for you. ... Chicken George.' Then it hit me. ... We had no idea the vibration and shock it would send around the world. It got crazy in a wonderful way."

On Broadway, Vereen also has starred in "Fosse," "I'm Not Rappa-

port," "Grind," "Jelly's Last Jam" and "A Christmas Carol." Other TV and film credits include "Louis Armstrong: Chicago Style," "How I Met Your Mother," "Grey's Anatomy," "Hot in Cleveland," "Idelwild" and "Top Five," among many others.

Even when he's not on stage or in front of a camera, Vereen still manages to attract a crowd. He is an avid public speaker on topics such as black history, social activism and overcoming adversity after fighting his way back from critical injuries that required months of physical rehabilita-