



Vereen brings song, dance to Crystal Lake

By JAMI KUNZER – jkunzer@shawmedia.com | September 18, 2013

Call it a career retrospective, a one-man presentation or a musical show.

However you describe it, Ben Vereen's appearance at the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake promises to be engaging.

The Broadway star and actor, who's also known for his inspirational speaking abilities, will take the stage at 8 p.m. Sept. 21. He said he'll sing songs from his many Broadway performances as well as others.

He'll dance a bit, speak about the causes that move him and basically just entertain in a performance designed to eventually grow into a Broadway show.

"It's going to be an evening of reflections, of promises and good times for all," Vereen said. "It's going to be fantastic."

A trio of musicians accompany him on his tour.

The dancing won't be as elaborate as it used to be, he said with a laugh.

"I don't do cartwheels or flips anymore," he said. "I leave that to my godson to do."

He referred to his godson, Usher.

Vereen's career spans from Broadway, where he earned the Tony Award and the Drama Desk Award for Best Actor in a Musical for his role in "Pippin," which opened in 1972, to a returning appearance on CBS' "How I Met Your Mother."

On Broadway, Vereen also has appeared in "Wicked," "Fosse," "I'm not Rappaport," "Hair," "Jesus Christ Superstar," "Grind," "Jelly's Last Jam" and "A Christmas Carol."

He's acted in numerous television series and films, most recently in the yet-to-be released Chris Rock comedy, "Finally Famous." Another of his films, the animated "Khumba," is due to be released in October.

Through the years, Vereen has become involved in social causes and said he tries encourage change through positivity.

“I just began to speak about the injustice of the drug abuse in our community and violence that we’re engaging in, and it’s more on the rise now,” he said.

In Chicago, he’s supported several causes, including a program titled “StandUP! Change Teen Statistics,” which involves live theater performances or high school students throughout the Midwest.

The program seeks to raise awareness and understanding of issues, such as bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, depression, peer pressure and other risky behaviors.

By reaching young people and promoting positive behavior, you’re building a better world, Vereen said.

“That’s what I’m passionate about,” he said. “In my show, I sort of touch on that, but I don’t preach about it.”

He also was involved in Chicago with the Rev. Johnnie Coleman’s establishment of the Christ Universal Temple, described as a “New Thought Christian” church. The church opened the Johnnie Coleman Institute in 1974, basically a school for the study of Jesus Christ teachings.

“She is like a Rosa Parks to me of Chicago,” Vereen said of Coleman.

He emphasized how blessed he’s been through the years, and how thankful he is to continue performing as he prepares his Broadway show.

“It won’t be the same show. It’s going to be a bigger show,” he said of the show he intends to create on Broadway. “This will be a skeleton of it.”