

# ARTS Monday

From high-school auditoriums to Lincoln Center...

## It ain't nothin' but a success

By MICHAEL GILTZ

EVERY night on stage, Ron Taylor — star of the Tony-nominated musical "It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues" — digs into the classic, boasting song "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man." Suddenly, he's the cock of the walk, turning Lincoln Center into a sweaty, smoldering juke joint as he struts and flirts and sings away.

Polite and disarming in private, the 42-year-old veteran of "The Wiz," the original "Little Shop of Horrors" (he was the voice of the plant) and countless TV shows becomes the biggest man around in every way imaginable — in size, in talent and in charm.

"Sometimes that song scares me," admits Taylor, who sat with co-star Gretha Boston before a recent show to share the hard work and setbacks that led to this rollicking revue's four Tony nominations.

Besides their respective nominations as Best Featured Male and Female Actor in a Musical, "Blues" was also nominated for Best Book.

"I used to be even crazier during 'Hoochie Coochie Man.' I tell you, there was a time — in D.C. especially — during matinees the church women would go crazy; they're clapping and they love it. Then I start 'Hoochie Coochie Man,'" he laughs, "and they'd take their programs and hold them up in front of their faces. They wouldn't even look at me."

Boston — who won a Tony playing Queenie in the Hal Prince revival of "Show Boat" — has her own turns in the spotlight, including an incandescent cover of the classic "St. Louis Blues." But as the two swap stories and compliments, Boston makes clear the rewards of this show — which she jumped into right after five years of nonstop touring with "Show Boat" — are more personal than applause or awards.

"This show was my healing, because there was some stuff I was dealing with personally and it opened me up," says Boston, who is a fan of self-help books by the likes of Deepak Chopra and who



Co-stars Gretha Boston and Ron Taylor are doing anything but singing the blues these days.

finds more strength from her own personal meditation than from "sitting in a church," as she puts it. "When you enter a new decade — or you're about to enter it — you begin to examine every aspect of your life."

They both feel blessed by the success of "Blues." Taylor had the idea for the show in 1987 while performing as a blues musician in the Hank Williams musical "Lost Highway." It stayed in the back of his mind until '94, when a friend approached him about turning the idea into a 45-minute educational show that could tour high schools.

He put together the original cast in one night — which included current cast members Dan Wheelman and "Mississippi" Charles Bevel. So successful with students that their parents soon clamored for tickets, "Blues" rapidly transformed into a full-blown revue, with more music and less lecturing about how blues influenced country, jazz and pop.

But great songs and low overhead only get you so far. Taylor was hospitalized with pneumonia

at one time and even auditioned Boston while he was still using an oxygen tank. "I was concerned," laughs Boston, who naturally worried whether he and the show would survive. (She knew her audition went well after Taylor and the others started grooving in their seats and singing backup during her rendition of Aretha Franklin's "Respect.")

The lowest point came in March 1997 when the Denver Center Theatre Company dropped its option on the show. "Here I was in a show that always got rave reviews and standing ovations and I had no producers," says Taylor. "It was a blessing [in the final analysis], but it was a scary time. I sent letters and packages with money I didn't have to every producer in New York saying, 'I have this show; you ought to send somebody.'"

Taylor might be tempted to gloat, but he just graciously accepts the compliments of those who turned him down. "Now they're like, 'You did it.'" He

shrugs. "I don't want to point a finger at anybody."

Maybe he's too busy. In the last few days Taylor's taped an interview segment for the Tony awards, dealt with the usual haggling over what song from the show will be performed — "We're going to do 'Members Only' because everyone is involved," he says — and mullied over the best record deal.

"I've always been cautious," admits Taylor. "Even today, the producers come to me and said, 'You still don't seem excited about all of this.' I'm excited, but I have to be quiet in my excitement because I can't claim this. God is good; He promised this to me a long time ago."

"A lot of people who don't believe in God or believe in God in a light way say, 'Oh man, here's another one of those guys talking about God.' But I tell you: The way this went down — a Broadway show moving in a week; the reviews we got straight across the board — I challenge anybody not to see God's hand in it."