Vinnette Carroll's "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God," the acclaimed gospel musical that has toured almost continuously since its New York premiere in 1976, proved the perfect vehicle for Teddy Pendergrass's live performance comeback.

Based on the Book of Matthew, it tells the story of Christ's last days, of his trial, crucifixion and resurrection.

Teddy Pendergrass knows something about trials and resurrections: Since a 1982 car crash, he's used a wheelchair, a quadriplegic with no feeling or movement below his chest. Before the accident, which happened right before he turned 32, he'd been one of R&B's most charismatic singers and sex symbols, an archetypal lover man known to his fervent female fans as "Teddy Bear."

There would be only a year-long hiatus from music -- Pendergrass has recorded seven albums since the accident, a number of them achieving platinum sales. And after a surprise guest appearance at 1985's Live Aid concert, there would be a few appearances on television specials, always for a single song.

But for 14 years, no stage was inviting enough to Pendergrass. It wasn't a question of money or opportunity. It was a question of heart and soul.

"I was extremely apprehensive," Pendergrass admits as the afternoon sun filters through the shaded windows of his spacious, specially designed mansion here at the far end of Philadelphia's Main Line. A sign in front of the house reads, "Chateau d'Amour."

"You wonder whether people are going to be accepting," he says. "And you wonder, 'Can I get through it?' Those were self-imposed questions, not those from other people. My own inhibitions, my own self-doubt."

There was also the pride of past glories, when Pendergrass would prowl a stage, shirtless, drenched in sweat, ecstatically emoting in his husky,
gospel-inflected voice. In his mind, he was without peers.

"When I stepped on the stage prior to the accident, there was nobody who could step on a stage with me, nobody, and I don't mean that as a brag," says Pendergrass. "Because of that I had a whole lot of concern and doubt as to whether I could still capture audiences, and still be able to create the same mystique. Until I felt that I was ready to try it, I couldn't put a timetable on it. I had to be ready."

After 14 years, he was. Two years ago, he joined the cast of the 20th-anniversary revival of "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God."

"I was ready for a trial," he says. "I was ready to see exactly what I needed to see so I could know what I was going to do with the rest of my life."

Vinnette Carroll created a role specifically for Pendergrass, casting him as a modern-day spirit who interprets the action onstage and acts as conduit for the thoughts of Jesus.

She also had him open with a solo performance of his 1990 hit "Truly Blessed."

"I know I've got to be strong, dealing with the situation/ I say it in my prayer and now I sing: I've been truly blessed./ There's nothing more precious than life/ I want the world to see the light that shines in me."

And from the very first show, audiences gave Pendergrass standing ovations the moment he arrived onstage in his motorized wheelchair.

"They applauded the courage, the strength of this man," says Carroll, who herself was taken with Pendergrass's "willingness to give himself to the project. It was never pity-party time, never feeling sorry for himself; it's how he could accommodate us and make this character work. One made all the adaptations one had to make for his wheelchair -- and it didn't stop him from getting around the stage and doing what he wanted to do. It's as if he'd been preparing for that all the time, like a volcano laying dormant and building strength."

"For me, 'Your Arms Too Short to Box With God' was a Godsend," says Pendergrass, who had for years turned down concert offers and who had to tour with a personal assistant and two nurses. The show, he explains, "was so spiritually aligned with my beliefs. It was absolutely what I felt I should be doing first to give honor and credence for my faith and to my Savior for where I am, for the ability to step back out and go through this again."

Which he did, for 23 weeks on the road, with eight shows a week, including Saturday and Sunday matinees.

"When I finished the play, I recognized that I'd gotten to where I said I was going to get to. It was a long journey to that goal -- to someday reach the stage, to get back to where I left off, to continue my life in the medium that I started out. It was a jubilant time."

"Truly Blessed" is also the name of Teddy Pendergrass's just-published autobiography. He'll speak Monday at the Smithsonian's Baird Auditorium; on
Tuesday he'll appear at Vertigo Books, where pre-signed bookplates will be available. Though he has some motion in his arms, Pendergrass cannot grasp objects like a pen, so a traditional book-signing is impossible.

It's a fact of life, a consequence that Pendergrass, now 48, addresses with a certain serenity. While co-authoring the book with Patricia Romanowski, he noticed a lifelong thread of tragedy: almost dying at birth . . . an absent father murdered when Teddy was 12 . . . the murder of a former lover and manager . . . the sudden crash and the inexorable rehab.

"My life has been a series of mountain climbs," Pendergrass says. "Always taking the challenge, always doing what others might consider undoable. I've always taken the challenge and I continue to take the challenge. I don't know why -- I don't need any more challenges. I think I've had enough!"

A Time of Silence

On March 18, 1982, on his way to a downtown Philadelphia nightclub, Pendergrass's Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit lost its brakes on a winding road, careened off a metal guardrail and crashed into a tree. Pendergrass wasn't wearing a seat belt and his head jammed into the roof, breaking his neck and partially severing his spinal cord between the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae.

That night, Pendergrass found himself at the Spinal Cord Injury Center at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, the very same hospital where he'd been born.

After the accident, there would be six months in the hospital and rehab clinic before he could return to the original "Chateau d'Amour," a mansion with 34 marbled rooms. There, he underwent an extended period of self-imposed isolation and depression, refusing even to participate in rehab.

And though his voice was basically unaffected by the accident, it took a while for Pendergrass to get past his own silence.

"I never opened my mouth and tried to sing because I was too afraid of what might not come out," he explains. "I never attempted to sing until one time in the hospital when I heard a coffee commercial. It was so melodic and so beautiful that I laid in the bed and tried it. It was spontaneous: 'Okay, this is what you need to do. Hold your breath and do it, 'cause you're going to need to find out sooner or later.' "

Pendergrass found he was still in tune.

In 1985 he appeared on a stage for the first time since the accident when Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson invited him as a special guest in their segment of the internationally broadcast Live Aid concert from Philadelphia's JFK Stadium. Pendergrass sang the opening verse of "Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand)." And the 90,000 people in the stadium did what Pendergrass could not -- they stood up to cheer and shout out their love.

"Jubilation!"
That's how Pendergrass recalls the moment. "If I could have, I probably would have cried. And it let me know that in the future, there's a chance at this.

"But first you have to rebuild you, who you are, and that takes different people different time.

And that, Pendergrass says, is "why this book took so long. It took me many years to reflect, think, grow up and be in a place where I'm secure and confident within myself to be doing what I'm doing, to know where my life is going, to feel that I can get there irrespective of this disability. I'm just at that place now where I can tell you what I'm doing, not what's been done.

"I'm moving on."

In the '60s he was simply moving up, a youngster who'd grown up in a North Philadelphia ghetto, who'd sung gospel at the Glad Tidings Holiness Church, who'd fallen under the spell of R&B at the nearby Uptown Theater's 50-cent Saturday matinees, yet had never taken singing particularly seriously.

In fact, Pendergrass, a self-taught drummer, first took to the stage behind a drum kit, landing a job with the Blue Notes, a Philadelphia vocal group that had been around since 1956 with little success. Eventually, Pendergrass moved to the microphone, and by the early '70s, he was fronting the group, though it bore the name of its co-founder and manager, Harold Melvin.

For much of the '70s, the lushly orchestrated Philly Sound was the match of Motown and Stax, with material that was both romantic and socially conscious. Philadelphia International Records was operated by writer-producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, with a roster than included the O'Jays, Stylistics, Spinners and Intruders, as well as the Blue Notes. While Pendergrass was with the Blue Notes, the group scored No. 1 hits with "If You Don't Know Me by Now," "The Love I Lost," "Hope That We Can Be Together Soon" and the politically charged "Wake Up Everybody."

In 1975, following an acrimonious split with Melvin, Pendergrass left for a solo career that took off with 1978's steamy chart-topper "Close the Door" and the following year's equally torrid invitation "Turn Off the Lights." Other hits included "Come Go With Me," "I Can't Live Without Your Love," "Choose Me" and "Love TKO." Pendergrass became a major heartthrob, particularly evidenced by his "For Women Only" concerts. He also became the first black male singer with five consecutive multi-platinum albums.

Getting Up

Teddy Pendergrass says that he has many options now -- more than he ever thought he would have. While he continues to make records -- a new Christmas album has just been released -- he also has interests in real estate and business management. There's a certain calm about the live entertainment side, particularly after the lengthy run of "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God."

"I'm happy with that, happy to know I was able to complete the tour unscathed, unharmed. Tired as heck because it was a grueling time, but we came through it. I proved to myself most of all that I could do it, and that gives me
a margin to take a breath. I now don't feel under any pressure to do that. And I'm interested in singing gospel -- it's where my heart is, where my head is."

As for his injury, and the limitations imposed by his disability, "I am accustomed to it, but I don't accept it," Pendergrass says firmly.

"I understand it, I live with it, but I don't accept its parameters and guidelines on what people feel you should or shouldn't do. It's a state of mind, and certainly physically debilitating, but now that I've learned what I can do, I can fight."

That's why he founded the Teddy Pendergrass Educational/Occupational Alliance for the Disabled. The group challenges stereotypes and bridges the gap between potential and productivity by reeducating disabled individuals and encouraging corporations to hire them. "What doesn't happen is we're not taught an occupation," Pendergrass notes. "Rehab is usually just being taught to live your days out the best way you can, and to me that's an insult."

"All the institutions that are out there looking for cures are wonderful, but in the meantime a lot of people are sitting at home or in nursing homes, whether from accidents or gang violence, and they're feeling hopeless. They're in despair because they have no way of being productive. . . . What's done is done and what you have to figure out is where you go from here."

"The greatest thing I heard was one of my managers saying, 'We all fall down. It's not that you fall down, it's how you get up.' "

Paralyzed in an accident, the singer has written an autobiography: "It took me many years to reflect, think, grow up and be in a place where I'm secure and confident." "Rehab is usually just being taught to live your days out the best way you can, and to me that's an insult."