

## **The Color Purple @ The Muny**

Music and Lyrics by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, and Stephen Bray

Book by Marsha Norman

Based on the novel by Alice Walker and the Warner Bros./Amblin Entertainment film

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Confession time: the Muny's production of *The Color Purple* is my first time seeing this story in full. I had never read the original Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Alice Walker; I had never seen Steven Spielberg's Oscar-nominated film version (which was the big break for Whoopi Goldberg); I had also never listened to the cast recording of the musical. I think my lack of knowledge served me pretty well because, after finally seeing it on stage, I was left so much more surprised that I absolutely loved it. The Muny's production of *The Color Purple* utilizes a strikingly minimal production design and economical directing that's topped off with an amazing ensemble cast – this is the kind of musical theatre that I crave for.

*The Color Purple* takes place in the Southern United States from 1909 to 1946, following the life of Celie Harris, a poor, uneducated Black woman. At the start of the show, we see that a fourteen-year-old Celie has been impregnated for the second time by Alphonso, her abusive, rapist stepfather who takes away both babies after they are born, with Celie under the assumption that he will kill them. At age 22, Celie is sold off by Alphonso to be the wife of sharecropper Albert Johnson, a bitter, heartless, cold man who forces Celie to only refer to him as "Mister." The only person who seems to care about Celie at all is her younger sister, Nettie. After Celie gets married, Nettie ran away from Alphonso to be with Celie and Mister's family. However, Mister is determined to keep Celie under his thumb, so he violently forces Nettie to stay far away from her and his family, and he threatens Celie with death if he ever sees her write to or receive letters from Nettie.

By the age of 25, Celie has lived a life defined by fear and insecurity, incurring the wrath of abusive men who constantly tell her that she is undesirable and worthless. She sees Harpo, Mister's son from a previous marriage, turn 18. Harpo moves out to seek his fortune, buying a house that he turns into a juke joint where Celie and Mister are invited to attend. It is here that Celie meets three women who utterly and completely change her life. The first is Sofia, Harpo's wife who is a total firebrand, being the very epitome of the strong independent woman who doesn't take guff from anyone; if someone abuses her, she fights back ten times harder, rendering people unrecognizable if necessary. Next is Squeak, the joint's waitress who is a flirtatious vamp, taking a bite out of every man she sees (including Harpo, but that doesn't last very long thanks to Sofia). Finally, there is the juke joint's main act: popular jazz singer Shug Avery. Even though Shug lives the exciting life of a glamorous bohemian, she teaches Celie to take comfort in the simple pleasures of life (such as "the color purple") and gives her the confidence to believe that Nettie may still be alive and well. Sofia, Squeak, and Shug all

encourage Celie to stand up for herself, assert her own personhood, and discover her inner beauty.

*The Color Purple* has to be one of the most complex musicals I have ever seen. It's an epic story with a grand scope that intensely, poignantly portrays the lives of victims of racist, sexist systems that only exist to keep them in poverty. This is a very difficult show to perform for any theatre, but thanks to the leadership of director Lili-Anne Brown, the Muny handles this material with the gravity that it deserves. Anastacia McCleskey gives us a tour-de-force performance as Celie, carrying the weight of this sweeping epic entirely on her shoulders. McCleskey has a great stage presence, a great voice, and ably conveys Celie's arc from being completely hopeless and vulnerable, all the way to being unwaveringly commanding and strong. Her chemistry with Tracee Beazer as Shug portrays the perfect romance between two artists. Gilbert Domally as Harpo, Nicole Michelle Haskins as Sofia, and Erica Durham as Squeak all have fantastic comic turns that transition beautifully into stoic self-assuredness. Nasia Thomas radiates utter determination as Nettie, while Evan Tyrone Martin makes for the perfect complicated, redeemable villain as Mister. There's also some great work from Shantel Cribbs, Alexis J. Roston, and Melanie Loren as Darlene, Doris, and Jarene, the Church Ladies that serve as the story's Greek Chorus. The main cast members are supported by an excellent ensemble that capably performs Breon Arzell's stylistic choreography; as always, they are accompanied by the wonderful Muny Orchestra conducted by musical director Jermaine Hill.

*The Color Purple* is truly an actor's musical – its success relies purely on the strength of its performers, rather than on spectacle. The production design here is very minimalist, but it fills the Muny stage very well while also serving the story beautifully. The unit set by Arnel Sanianco consists of several wooden panels and platforms that serve as the perfect backdrop for Paul Deziel's really creative video design, as well as Heather Gilbert's lights, Samantha C. Jones's costumes, Kelley Jordan's hair and makeup, and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound.

If you are someone like me who has never been exposed to *The Color Purple* in any way, the musical is a fantastic introduction for you. After seeing this, I can definitely see why *The Color Purple* is a contemporary classic – a game changer in the literary canon about the importance of family and community, done in a way that is at turns harrowing and sweet, but always captivating. *The Color Purple* is a story that will continue to be told for generations to come, and I will be genuinely shocked if this is the last time I see this show in St. Louis.