



P.L.A.Y.

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

OPRAH WINFREY PRESENTS

The Color Purple

The Musical about Love.



ILLUSTRATION BY PETER SYLVADA

December 13, 2007 – March 9, 2008
Ahmanson Theatre

The Color Purple
Based on the novel
by Alice Walker
Book by Marsha Norman
Music and Lyrics by
Brenda Russell, Allee
Willis and Stephen Bray
Directed by Gary Griffin

DISCOVERY GUIDE

THE YOUNG AUDIENCES PROGRAM PERFORMANCE OF *THE COLOR PURPLE*
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How to Use this Discovery Guide

The Color Purple is a musical adapted from the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Alice Walker. It is a sprawling story that spans several decades in the life of Celie, a poor, rural black woman. The story references many details of African-American life in the Deep South in the first half of the 20th century. This Discovery Guide contains a brief summary of life in the rural South as well as some background about Alice Walker. We hope that the brief overview of the period and the source material will enhance your enjoyment of the show.

Discovery Guide Objectives

- Provide background material that will illuminate the context of the story
- Prepare the audience for the play's mature themes, such as domestic and racial violence
- Promote independent thinking about violence, oppression and personal relationships
- Explore what makes a “family”
- Encourage further reading and study

Vocabulary

words are in **bold type**.
Definitions are within
each section.

DISCOVERY GUIDE CREDITS

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PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK

LEFT TO RIGHT: Jeannette Bayardelle and LaToya London.



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Alice Walker

THE COLOR PURPLE IS BASED ON A NOVEL of the same title by Alice Walker.

When the book was published in 1982, it won both the Pulitzer Prize for literature and the American Book Award. In 1985, Walker and a co-writer adapted the story for the screen. The film, also called *The Color Purple*, starred Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover and Oprah Winfrey and was directed by Steven Spielberg. *The Color Purple* you are going to see is a stage musical, which premiered on Broadway in December, 2005; so Walker's novel has been adapted for the second time.

Walker attended Spelman College and Sarah Lawrence College, where she was one of six African-American students. She also spent time in Africa, worked in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and taught college in Mississippi and Massachusetts. She currently lives in Mendocino, California. She has written many novels, essays and short stories, but *The Color Purple* remains the work for which she is best known.

Alice Walker was born in 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. When she was eight years old, she was accidentally shot in the eye with a BB gun, and she developed a disfiguring scar in the injured eye. The accident left a scar on her personality, too. For six years afterward, she kept her head down and would not look up. (The eye was successfully repaired many years later.) Perhaps as a result of this experience, self-esteem and body image issues appear in Walker's writing.

As the saying goes, "Write what you know." Walker knows life in rural Georgia with all of its natural beauty, racial discrimination and violence. She writes, "In my immediate family too there was violence. Its roots seemed always to be embedded in my father's need to dominate my mother and their children and in her resistance (and ours), verbal and physical, to any such domination." Walker's father had a limited education and feared that if his children were educated, they wouldn't relate to him. Walker was a natural student, and her father's opposition to her academic aspirations created the very rift that he feared; by the time she left for college, their relationship was finished. Walker came to terms with her father's attitude many years after his death, but her difficulties with him left an indelible mark on her thinking and her work.

Many of the characters in *The Color Purple* are based on Walker's family members and other people she knew as a young person. A big influence on her work is the writer Zora Neale Hurston, whom Walker calls her "foremother." Walker is credited with rediscovering Hurston's work, which had fallen into obscurity, and bringing her back to the attention of academics and the reading public. The character Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* is partly based on Hurston. Walker feels strongly that women need to connect with the experiences of their female forebears. According to Walker, the stories of the women who came before us are an indispensable part of our collective history. Knowing where we come from makes us whole and provides a wellspring of knowledge and wisdom.

Walker is a "womanist." In contrast with feminism, which is viewed by many as a movement primarily for and about white women, womanism affirms the experience and contributions of black women. Womanism is not a philosophy of exclusion, however. It is a holistic theory that supports all who have been oppressed, including



PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.

L TO R: Michelle Williams and Jeannette Bayardelle.

Synopsis

THE COLOR PURPLE TELLS THE STORY OF CELIE, an African-American woman living in rural Georgia. The story spans the period of her life from 1909 to 1949. When we first meet 14-year-old Celie, she is pregnant by her own father for the second time. The baby is born and Pa takes the baby away, just as he did with the first one. Pa gives Celie in marriage to Mister, who already has a gaggle of children, not much younger than Celie is. Mister beats Celie, yells at her and puts her to work as gardener, cook, maid, handyman and ranch hand, while giving all of his affection to another woman, the singer Shug Avery. When Celie's sister Nettie, fleeing their father, asks to live with them, Mister sends her away, plunging Celie into loneliness and despair. Only two people have power over Mister: Shug Avery and his father, Ol' Mister.

Years pass, and Celie quietly endures much hardship and abuse. She builds an unorthodox family. She befriends gentle Harpo, Mister's son, who loves the feisty Sofia. Instead of learning from Sofia, Celie alienates her with a few words of bad advice to Harpo. Celie falls in love with Mister's mistress, Shug, and thinks she has found a true friend. Doris, Darlene and Jarene, the church ladies, are the "wagging tongues"; they spread gossip and express public opinion.

In spite of everything, Celie develops a strong self-identity and a spirituality that is true to her own experience and observation of the world. More than a simple tale of triumph over adversity, *The Color Purple* is a testament to the universal human striving for — among other things — peace of mind, wholeness and independence.

As in life, relationships in *The Color Purple* begin and end, evolve and change. *The Color Purple* portrays a family unit that is constantly in flux; people come and go in Celie's life, and roles are always shifting. Celie is the "star" of the show, but she and the other characters, when viewed as a group, form a constellation. Celie's story raises the question, "What makes a family?" ●

Porgy and Bess

ANOTHER SHOW about African Americans from the rural South is *Porgy and Bess*, which premiered on Broadway in 1935. Composed by George Gershwin with lyrics by his brother, Ira, and libretto by DuBose Heyward, the show takes place in Catfish Row, South Carolina. It tells the story of Porgy, a crippled beggar, and Bess, a woman of low reputation. Like *The Color Purple*, the music in *Porgy and Bess* is a blend of Broadway, blues, jazz and other musical idioms. Although the show is considered to be a classic of American musical theatre, it is not universally loved due to its portrayal of a seedy side of African-American life. ●

[EXERCISE]

Your Family Constellation

HOW IS YOUR FAMILY STRUCTURED? Does your family unit consist of Mom, Dad and siblings, or is there another arrangement in your household? Do other relatives or persons live with you? Are you close to people who do not live with you? If so, what is their role? What is your role?

In the space below, draw a constellation that represents your family structure. Be sure to include yourself. Label each “star” with the name of a family member and a short phrase or list of words that describes their role. (Example: Dad – provider/lawmaker, Mom – provider/enforcer, Alicia – baby sister/nuisance, etc.) Give your constellation a shape and a name that reflects what your family means to you.



Vocabulary

Antebellum: Literally, “before the war,” especially the American Civil War

Score: The music for a movie or theatrical production

Sharecropper: A tenant farmer who receives credit for seed and tools and an agreed-upon share of the value of the crop, minus expenses

Plessy v. Ferguson

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that separate railroad cars for blacks and whites on interstate rail lines was constitutional. This ruling became the legal justification for the doctrine of “separate but equal” that allowed whites to separate themselves from blacks in almost every public place. Segregation, which was already a fact of life in the South, became the law of the land. It was not until the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that “separate but equal” was overturned. (The case for overturning *Plessy* was argued by Thurgood Marshall, who later became a Supreme Court justice.) ●

Way Down South in Dixie

UNTIL THE MID-20TH CENTURY, 90 percent of African Americans lived in the rural South. By law and custom, the notion of white superiority influenced every aspect of daily life. The idea that all black people were inferior to all whites was not only enshrined in state and local laws, it also was an article of faith. Many white people believed that God had made them landowners, bosses and lawmakers. Blacks were only fit, as most whites saw it, for farming and domestic service. In the culture of white supremacy, the most degraded, useless white person was worth more than the very best black one. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, any black person who displayed wealth, self-confidence, learning or defiance toward a white person courted physical violence. Horrendous acts were justified by trivial excuses. For example, if a black man accidentally touched a white woman, he might be jailed, lynched or worse. That said, members of an oppressed group are not necessarily nice to each other. As you will see in *The Color Purple*, family members inflict violence upon each other. Celie exists in a society in which power is strictly stratified by color, class and gender. As a poor, black woman, Celie is at the bottom of the heap.

By the standards of their time and place, the characters in *The Color Purple* would have been considered very well off. Although most southern black farmers were **sharecroppers**, Mister owns, rather than rents, his farm. Shug Avery owns

a home and a car. Some characters run their own businesses. That level of ownership and financial independence was the exception rather than the rule in a region where whites despised “uppity” black people and contrived to keep them poor and subservient.

In the **antebellum** South, teaching slaves to read and write was forbidden by law. Up until the mid-20th century, black people still found that adequate schooling was difficult to come by. Hindrances to a good education included the underfunding of black schools, a general desire by southern whites to prevent blacks from advancing and Jim Crow laws that mandated segregation. When Nettie sings, “Picture me in a schoolhouse with my college degree,” she expresses the aspirations of everyone whose path in life is full of obstacles.

The church filled many roles in black society. It was, of course, a place of worship, but churches also served as schools, town halls, social halls and centers of political action. Attending church was expected, and pastors, preachers and other church officials held great power over their parishioners, often the power of Heaven and Hell. Just as the church was central to daily life in the South, gospel music was indispensable in black Baptist and Pentecostal churches. Gospel music grew from Christian hymns and the work songs of slaves. In turn, gospel

[EXERCISE]

Leveling the Playing Field

SINCE *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Americans have struggled to correct imbalances in opportunities for non-white citizens. Today's news is filled with stories about challenges to school bussing and affirmative action programs. Research the history of affirmative action in college admissions and debate the following statement:

The policy of affirmative action in college admissions has outlived its usefulness.

PRO

CON

influenced later forms of music, such as blues, ragtime, honky-tonk and soul, all of which are included in the **score** of *The Color Purple*.

Music has long served as a vehicle for rebellion and dissent, particularly among people with little or no power. Music was one of the few arenas in which slaves were permitted self-expression. Their songs often held covert messages of power and freedom. "Follow the Drinking Gourd," for example, gives directions for the Underground Railroad, the gourd being code for the Big Dipper. A far more rebellious place than church to hear music was the "juke joint" — a place to drink, dance, gamble, eat or do anything else that sounded like a good time. Juke joints usually operated continuously from Friday to Sunday nights and were located at remote crossroads far from the authorities or "respectable" people who would have been shocked by the goings-on within. The term "juke" has been traced to several West African words and may mean "party" or "disorderly." Many famous blues musicians started their careers in juke joints before they became recording artists. Juke joint music is "outsider music," even within the black community that invented it. It is an expression of the lowest stratum of working-class people — those with no influence at all — who need to cut loose, vent and even celebrate their frustrations about "the man," love, work and life. ●

Dog Eat Dog

The Color Purple addresses issues of personal power as well as cycles of oppression. People who are abused often pass on violent behavior to those less powerful than themselves, and victimized groups often accept the status quo without question. Mister is a black landowner oppressed by white society. In turn, he oppresses his workers, who are also black. He gives Celie a hard time because he can, because he thinks she is ugly and because for a time, Celie believes him. Sofia will not allow anyone to treat her badly, and her outspokenness gets her into trouble with the white people in town. Shug Avery parlays her beauty and voice into a successful singing career and several romances, but her overt sexuality engenders the judgment and disapproval of her family and the community — a form of oppression in itself.

All the characters speak in dialect. Their use of language indicates their race, class, location and education. It dictates their role in society and limits their opportunities. However, as you'll see in the play, these obstacles sometimes spark innovation and resourcefulness. Adversity is indeed the mother of invention.

[EXERCISE]

Generations of Oppression and Opportunity

What obstacles do you face? What advantages or tools do you have? What were the obstacles and advantages that your parents and grandparents experienced when they were your age? Interview a parent and grandparent — or other adults from their generations — to fill in the chart below.

	OBSTACLES	OPPORTUNITIES
Me BIRTH YEAR:		
Parent BIRTH YEAR:		
Grandparent BIRTH YEAR:		



L TO R – Lynette DuPree, Virginia Ann Woodruff and Kimberly Ann Harris (*The Church Ladies*).



Push Da Button.



Shug Avery Comin' to Town.



Stu James, *Any Little Thing*.



African Homeland.

PHOTOS BY PAUL KOLNIK.

[EXERCISE] Celie's Musical World

Celie's world is portrayed musically. Each song in the play furthers the story. Some songs describe an action or a character. A character might express her fears or desires, proclaim her beliefs, make an important decision or come to a realization in a song. Consider how music was used in *The Color Purple* to answer the following questions.

Name a song from the play that advances the story:

What information does it contain?

Name a song or musical genre that tells a story from your life:

What does it tell the listener about you?

Name a song from the play that expresses someone's fears, desires or beliefs:

What does it tell us?

Name a song or musical genre that expresses one of your fears, desires or beliefs:

How, specifically, does it relate to your life?

Name a song from the play about a decision or realization:

Whose decision is it and what is it?

Name a song or musical genre that describes one of your decisions or realizations:

What does it say about your thought process?

[EXERCISE] Who's Wearing the Pants?

The characters and relationships in *The Color Purple* are dynamic; they change over time. For example, the way Mister relates to Celie changes drastically from the beginning to the end of the play. Celie and Sofia undergo dramatic changes within themselves and in the way they relate to others. The relationships portray a series of power struggles, evolving as characters grow, change and learn.

Thinking about power, cycles of violence and family roles, compare and contrast the following relationships from the play.

Celie/Nettie & Celie/Sofia:

Mister/Ol' Mister & Harpo/Mister:

Sofia/Harpo & Shug/Mister:

Celie/Mister & Celie/Shug:

Celie/Mister at the beginning & end of the play:

Concluding Remarks

We hope this Discovery Guide has enhanced your enjoyment of *The Color Purple*. If your interest in the topics and themes of the show has been sparked, a list of resources for further study follows.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

The Color Purple

by Alice Walker (Washington Square Press, 1982)

The original work upon which the play is based, winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Their Eyes Were Watching God

by Zora Neale Hurston (HarperCollins, 2000)

A novel of the Deep South, a big influence on Walker's work

Trouble in Mind

by Leon F. Litwack (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998)

A comprehensive history of black southerners in the age of Jim Crow

WEBSITES

members.tripod.com/chrisdanielle/alicebio_1.html

Succinct summary of Alice Walker's life

www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-998

Brief biography that focuses on Walker's literary achievements; includes a suggested reading list

www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/11/17/1454228

Transcript of a radio interview with Walker about her essays

www.lkwipl.org/wihohio/hurs-zor.htm

Biography of Zora Neale Hurston

findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2096/is_4_48/ai_54064297/pg_1

Academic paper about womanism by a female African-American theologian

www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afamoo8.html

History of black migration to northern U.S. states

northbysouth.kenyon.edu/1999/religion/southernchurch.htm

Description and history of southern black churches

FILM

The Color Purple

directed by Steven Spielberg (Warner Brothers, 1985)

The film adaptation of the novel

Last of the Mississippi Jukes

directed by Robert Muggge (Sanctuary Films, 2003)

A documentary tour of the remaining juke joints with actor Morgan Freeman

Deep Blues: A Musical Pilgrimage to the Crossroads

directed by Robert Muggge (Universal Music and Video, 2004)

A documentary about the origins and development of the blues

P.L.A.Y.

FOR 37 YEARS, Center Theatre Group's P.L.A.Y. (Performing for Los Angeles Youth) has served 25,000 – 35,000 young people, teachers and families annually through a variety of performances, residencies, discount ticket programs and innovative educational experiences. P.L.A.Y. offers programs that allow young people, teachers and families to attend productions at the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas Theatres for low or no cost. P.L.A.Y. is dedicated to artistic excellence and innovation in its theatrical productions and to the development of young people's skills and creativity through the exploration of theatre, its literature, art and imagination.

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