

# Review: 'Color Purple' stays true to book

NEW YORK (AP) - At the beginning of "The Color Purple," two young girls sit in a giant, gnarled tree that dominates the stage of the vast Broadway Theatre.

It's a sweet-tempered image of sisterhood that haunts this respectful, occasionally roof-raising musical adaptation of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning tale of female empowerment.

The show, which opened Thursday, remains surprisingly faithful to Walker's story of triumph over adversity set in rural Georgia. It is sometimes too faithful, as its adapters attempt to cram a lot of plot into this careful stage version, meticulously directed by Gary Griffin.

Walker's heartfelt novel revels in its own idiosyncratic style, written as letters, many of them by its uneducated heroine, Celie. This stage version could use a little of the adventurousness of its literary predecessor.

In many ways, "The Color Purple" is an old-fashioned musical. For example, there is an honest-to-goodness overture, a rarity these days. And it has been lavishly produced, including some rustic homespun settings by design wizard John Lee Beatty and colorful period costumes by Paul Tazewell.



Talk show host, magazine publisher, billionaire and Broadway producer, Oprah Winfrey speaks to audience members as she takes a curtain call with the cast of her book-adapted Broadway musical "The Color Purple" in New York last week.

The musical primarily focuses on Celie's journey from abuse to independence and self-esteem, an arduous trek that takes some four decades, from 1909 to 1949.

One problem for the show is that Celie is a difficult character to turn into a musical-theater icon. For much of the evening, she is stoic, even passive, not the kind of person who would naturally burst into song. Those musical moments are left to the

people — both men and women — who surround her.

It's to the credit of LaChanze, who portrays Walker's waiflike creation, that Celie holds her own with the other, more flamboyant characters. The actress has a warm, wide grin and a touching vulnerability that enables her to command attention despite a paucity of musical numbers.

Her big moment, in fact, is more dramatic than musi-

cal when she finally has the courage to tell off her violent, ill-tempered husband, played by Kingsley Leggs. Curiously, it's spoken, not sung.

Marsha Norman, author of "night, Mother," adapted Walker's book for the stage. She preserves all the novel's dramatic highlights, and because of that, "The Color Purple" becomes a showcase for its female performers, including a trio of small-town biddies. The three are a

Southern-fried Greek chorus who cluck and pluck over Celie's tribulations and, what is more important, help to reinforce a plot that sometimes threatens to get out of control.

Among the large distaff supporting cast, the standout is the scene-stealing Felicia P. Fields as Sofia.

It's the role played in the 1985 Steven Spielberg film version of the novel by Oprah Winfrey, now one of the show's Broadway producers.

Sofia is the antithesis of Celie. She's a woman who doesn't take guff from anyone, including her compliant husband, Harpo. Fields' big anthem — a ditty called "Hell No!" — musically jump-starts the show midway through the first act. Fields growls her way through the song with comic determination.

The musical doesn't shy

away from its lesbian subplot, specifically Celie's attachment to the hedonistic Shug Avery. This blues singer strikes a chord with both women and men, including Celie's husband, and the sexy Elisabeth Withers-Mendes plays her with raunchy delight.

More problematic is the role of Nettie, Celie's beatific sibling, played by the lovely Renee Elise Goldsberry. She's a saintly creature — the woman goes off to Africa to become a missionary — and thus less interesting than the show's more earthy characters.

When the musical switches to that exotic locale, the production slows down, stopped by a long tribal dance segment choreographed by Donald Byrd.

The men are left with less to do, even though Leggs, as the abusive husband, gets a musical moment of redemption. And Harpo (Brandon Victor Dixon) has to share his big comedy number, a randy song called "Any Little Thing," with the formidable Sofia.

The score by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis and Stephen Bray, is a melting pot of melodies and lyrics. Eclectic to the extreme, it ranges from the blues to gospel to soul and more traditional Broadway sounds. There's even one pop power ballad, "What About Love?" This number, sung in the show by LaChanze and Withers-Mendes, closes the first act, and is destined for major airplay.

Fans of Walker's novel most likely will not be disappointed in this reverent stage retelling and will embrace it heartily as a live souvenir of the original. Others may crave a little more theatrical excitement.

## Wonder to sing at Super Bowl pre-game

DETROIT (AP) — Motown fans miffed by the NFL's choice of the Rolling Stones for Super Bowl halftime entertainment are getting at least some satisfaction: Stevie Wonder will perform during the pre-game show at Ford Field.

Wonder will play three or four songs during the pre-game show before the game Feb. 5, Lori Lambert, vice president of strategic marketing for Universal Motown

Records Group, told The Associated Press.

Other artists — still to be announced — also will be featured in the pre-game show, Lambert said.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said the league was not prepared to make an announcement about the pre-game show.

Wonder performed during halftime in 1999.

The NFL's announcement last week that the Rolling

Stones would provide the halftime entertainment prompted an uproar in Detroit, the original home of Motown Records, which gave the world such artists as Wonder, Smokey Robinson, the Supremes and the Four Tops.

Detroit-area residents are fiercely proud of the city's musical contributions, which extend beyond Motown to more recent stars like Eminem and Kid Rock.

Aretha Franklin's singing career started at the Detroit church where her father preached, and the Queen of Soul still lives in the area. Ted Nugent, Madonna and Bob Seger also hail from Michigan.

Many saw it as a snub that those stars were passed over for halftime. Detroit radio personality Mildred Gaddis gave out the number of an NFL official on the air and urged listeners to call and complain.

McCarthy said it was always the league's intention to honor Motown in the pre-game show. But halftime, he said, is bigger than Detroit.

McCarthy noted that the 1998 Super Bowl in San Diego featured a Motown tribute in honor of the label's 40th anniversary. Performers included Robinson, Martha Reeves and The Temptations.

February's game will be the second in a row that halftime entertainment has been provided by British musicians over 60. Paul McCartney played halftime last year, as the NFL sought a family-friendly act to follow Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" in 2004.

## Billboard

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No Doubt singer Gwen Stefani won the new artist of the year award on the strength of her solo debut, "Love.Angel.Music.Baby," while her single "Hollaback Girl" was the digital song of the year. Stefani called up collaborator Pharrell to the stage to accept the latter award with her. Reggaeton sensation Daddy Yankee also won two trophies, including Latin album of the year for "Barrio Fino" (El Cartel/Machete), as did Mario for his single "Let Me Love You," including R&B/hip-hop song of the year.

Though he's just two albums into his solo career, Kanye West was honored for his significant success with Billboard's Artist Achievement Award. "When I first came out I was a hot head — I thought I was the greatest," he said in accepting the trophy. "I still

think I'm the greatest.

R. Kelly, who performed earlier in the show by a pool filled with scantily clad dancers, led the show's finale, "Let Your Light Shine," a song he wrote as a tribute to Gulf Coast hurricane victims as part of the "Come Together Now" relief project. Kelly was joined by a chorus, a cast of dancers and most of the evening's participating artists, all dressed in white.

Billboard Music Awards are based on sales data compiled by Nielsen SoundScan and radio information monitored by Nielsen Broadcast-Data Systems. Winners are determined by the 2005 year-end charts, which reflect the weekly charts published from December 2004 through November 2005. Billboard compiles more than 250 recap charts for its annual Year In Music issue, which will hit newsstands Dec. 16.

## Chappelle

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His disappearance — announced by Comedy Central on May 4 — spurred reports that he had mental or drug problems, but Chappelle later said he was unhappy with the show's creative direction.

"I'm definitely stressed out," he told *Time* magazine a few days after Comedy Central announced the show was indefinitely postponed. "I'm not crazy, I'm not smoking crack."

He spent two weeks in South Africa before returning home to his farm near Yellow Springs, about 75 miles northeast of Cincinnati. Chappelle, now 32, has since resumed performing live standup.

In the meantime, "Chappelle's Show" has hung in limbo.

"We had reached out several times to Dave's camp and asked, 'What would you like to do?'" Herzog said. "But we never received a definitive response... We thought it was time to start unearthing the material we had." He laughed. "It's kind of like Bob Dylan's 'Basement Tapes.'"