

Review: The Color Purple

By Sara Lamerton

***The Color Purple* at Theatre Royal Plymouth**

Based on Alice Walker's 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, this revived 2019 Leicester Curve and Birmingham Hippodrome co-production hit Plymouth last night for the second leg of its seven-venue tour.

If you've ever read the book or watched the movie, you'll know how hard-hitting and emotive the story of Celie, a Black woman growing up in America's Deep South during the first half of the 20th century, is as she navigates familial abuse, rampant misogyny, forced marriage, and a life of servitude.

We follow Celie (Me'sha Bryan) from innocent days playing with her soon to be estranged sister Nettie (Aaliyah Zhane) as her childhood is slowly but surely ripped away by the men around her. Plunged into a dark and unforgiving existence, Celie readily sacrifices herself in order to save Nettie and her dream of becoming a teacher from the lecherous longings of Mister (Ako Mitchell). However, simply trading one abusive household for another, we witness Celie's husband control and disregard her at every turn.

Celie's life looks set on course for misery, loneliness, and disempowerment; that is until she finds a new ally in Mister's mistress, Shug Avery (Bree Smith). Celie's understanding of herself slowly begins to evolve, discovering what love can feel like after being told just how beautiful she is for the first time ever.

Celie is also inspired to fight back by her interactions with Sofia (Anelisa Lamola), the wife of Harpo (Ahmed Hamad), Mister's son. A truly defiantly fierce female character who doesn't centre or enable men, and who will not be cowed even when that defiance comes at a high price. Here we also see how patterns of behaviour are passed down from one generation to another. Mister's own father, an abusive and controlling man, influences the decisions, behaviours, and choices of the subsequent generation of males, just as he too was moulded by his upbringing.

Even though the plot stays true to many harrowing examples of life in a not-too-distant past, it simply cannot portray the depth and breadth of this in such an emotionally triggering manner as the original novel and cinematic adaptation. Despite its best efforts to be sympathetic to the subject matter, it's a musical at heart containing much humour and light-heartedness along the way. With the beautiful, but often uplifting music and choreography by Ian Oakley and Mark Smith, for people expecting the experience of the book you certainly won't be getting this. You will, however, be introduced to something that is its own interpretation for a modern stage.

Having said that, Me'sha Bryan certainly does justice to the mammoth role she is

given. Seamlessly moving from a young, innocent girl to a strong and compassionate woman who accepts and forgives with grace, she opens herself up to a divine power as we bear witness to an against-the-odds transformation and eventual liberation. And it's not only Celie's character that grows, either. Deep down, each person contends with their own complex histories, relationships, and struggles in the fight for freedom.

The Color Purple, on until 1st October, is a story that resonates through the decades. The subject matter may look different from those of today's world, but the themes and messages still ring true. Ultimately, this is a story about triumphing over adversity; about hope, about love, about compassion. A story centring female solidarity and empowerment. As well as a tale of courage which leaves us inspired to make the world a better place, whilst being thankful for what those who came before fought so hard to change.