



If God ever listened to a poor black woman, the world would be a different place. -Celie

The Color Purple is currently playing at Roxy's Downtown. Their production is impressive, powerful, well-cast, and extremely well-wrought, from performances to design elements and direction. Do yourself a favor and get tickets for this show ASAP. The opening week shows were sold out, and I hear the rest of the run is selling out quickly.

The Color Purple is the musical adaptation of Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (and the popular 1985 Steven Spielberg film). The book was written by Marsha Norman, with music and lyrics by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, and Stephen Bray. The musical follows Celie, a teenager at the mercy of the abusive men in her life, as she negotiates 40 years of personal hell, liberation from domination, and eventual self-discovery. The Color Purple premiered at the Alliance Theatre Company in Atlanta, Georgia and opened on Broadway on November 1, 2005, where it was nominated for eleven 2006 Tony Awards, including Best Musical, Best Book, and Best Original Score. The London off-West End production moved to Broadway in 2015, winning the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical.

The gorgeous score features jazz, ragtime, gospel, African music, and blues, and is well played by the small musical ensemble led by Andy Bowers. Vocal direction by Huron Breaux is tight, and the vocals are well balanced.

The beautifully clever set by Michael Downs is all at once minimalist and rustic. The big barn slats used for the unit set has large vertical gaps to let the light through and also allow glimpses of the actors in offstage moments. Chairs are haphazardly hung on the wall and are taken down when necessary for any given scene. A few key set pieces round out the set. Lighting by Scott Olney highlights the set well, and uses lots of chorus pink and blue to achieve the necessary purple. Costumes by Chadwick Armstrong show a real feel for the era, with gorgeous yet subtle costumes in a rich neutral palette.

Director Rick Bumgardner tells the story clearly with every moment evenly modulated and beautifully staged. The actors deliver realistic emotion and turn in a solid ensemble piece. Kudos to Choreographer Courtney Wages for doing her research. She gave her cast some authentic African dance moves, understood through lines, and used the stage space well.

The performances in this show are wonderful! Beginning with the men, Big Dog introduces us to Mister, played by Huron Breaux, and his male cohort, including local film actor Thomas Hanks as Pa, local Griot Rob Simon as Ol' Mister, and local choir director Manuel Hutton, who plays Harpo, Sofia's husband and Squeak's love interest. Simon gives an outstanding turn with his tongue in cheek portrayal of Ol' Mister. Hutton tangles with Jaslyn Alexander's Sofia with great tenacity and care, matching her vocally in Any Little Thing, giving us a peek into their complicated relationship.

Breaux shows great vocal control, particularly in his soft upper passages in Mister's Song, showing the contrast between his harshness as a human, with the soft passion of a man realizing he has lost almost everything due to the cycle of abuse passed down from his father. It was a sublime performance.

The performances from the women in this show are so authentic and strong they speak to your soul. Natalie Rolfe, Priscella Brown, and Shelia Kinnard are the ladies of the Greek chorus, and they were so

intriguing with their delicious Robert Glasper/Black Radio syncopated speech, harmonies, and scatting. They left me wanting more.

Sunsiere Lee plays Squeak, an outspoken young woman who wants to sing at the juke joint, is endearing, and the best high pitched voice ever!

Jaslyn Alexander is POWERFUL as Sofia, a strong woman who suffers for showing her strength and independence. Her rich, strong belt grabs your attention in Mysterious Ways, and she utterly commands the stage during Hell, No!

Koko Blanton plays Shug Avery, the cabaret singer in control of her destiny. I've seen her previously in smaller comedic roles, like the Blind Girl in Toxic Avenger, using the upper registers of her range. This is Blanton's first dramatic role to date, and nails it, seals it up, and locks it down tight. Her Shug is sultry and grounded, singing this role easily with her lush alto.

From the heart rending Too Beautiful to the rhythmic Push The Button, Blanton easily owns this role.

Sophomore WSU Musical Theatre Major Sophia Hillman claims her rightful place among the theatre veterans on the stage as Celie's sister Nettie, who witnesses Celie's abuse and receives an education that allows her to escape Celie's fate and become a missionary in Africa. Hillman's performance is earnest and beautiful, easily negotiating her vocals between legit and belt territory.

The story does belong to Celie and Injoy Fountain does not disappoint. This is a complex role for a pop diva but Fountain digs deep into the role and gives us the portrait of a human who has no idea what her self-worth is until Shug and the others help her discover it. Fountain's portrayal of Celie is deep - Celie is uneducated but not an imbecile, accepting her lot in life, observing the behavior of others, and yet deep down we see the wants and needs of a woman stewing and bubbling until it reaches the surface, until the lid is lifted, and the

beautiful emotions burst forth, raw and bare, in an expertly sung I'm Here. Fountain tells Celie's story exceptionally well. Karla Burns must be very proud of her student.

Kudos to the rest of the ensemble I haven't mentioned, taking on smaller roles, and making the vocals sing: Arietta Austin, Levon Mathis, Jaden Kindle, Dave Wallace, and Brishjun Ray. The show was outstanding.

The Color Purple is 2 ½ hours with intermission, and is running until March 6th.

Coming up next for Roxy's Downtown is Bright Star, opening April 7th. For tickets, phone (316) 265-4400. Roxy's is located at 412 1/2 E. Douglas Ave., Wichita, KS 67202