

The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

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The Color Purple

Based upon the novel written by Alice Walker

Cast and Creative Team

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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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In Rehearsal

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From Page to Stage

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Beyond the Production

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Additional Resources & Outreach

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Plot Summary

From Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller comes a powerful, Tony Award-winning musical with a fresh, joyous score of jazz, ragtime, gospel and blues. This stirring family chronicle follows the inspirational Celie from the early to mid-20th century in the American south, as she journeys from childhood to womanhood, through joy and despair, anguish and hope to discover the true power of love and life. With a soul-rousing, Grammy-winning score, *The Color Purple* is an unforgettable and intensely moving American classic.

Tony Award, Best Revival of a Musical, 2016; Grammy Award, Best Musical Theater Album, 2017



THE ARMORY

Themes In The Novel & Musical:

1. Celie longs to wear purple, a color she associates with royalty and with vibrant women such as Shug, and a color she thinks God may have created in order to receive love. In the conclusion, she surrounds herself with purple. What makes this color special—special enough to become the novel's title?
2. *The Color Purple* has often been read as a metaphor for the African American legacy. What symbolism exists in the way has often been read as a metaphor for the African American legacy. What symbolism exists in the way Celie is separated from her children, denied an education, and valued only for her housekeeping and her sexual capabilities? What turning point does Sofia's act of defiance (despite its brutal consequences) reflect?
3. What is the significance of Celie's success as a manufacturer of pants (in terms of commerce, creativity, defiance, comfort, or other parameters)?
4. How do Celie and Nettie picture God? What interpretation of God does Nettie encounter in Africa?
5. Many of the characters take note of the melanin content in the skin of others. What do these "degrees of darkness" symbolize to them? Is it associated with status?
6. What determines whether someone is considered beautiful today, versus in the early twentieth century? How do you define beauty? Why were so few people willing to see the beauty in Celie?

Gender Roles Discuss:

Pre-Show Questions

- It was important to Alice Walker that *The Color Purple* be a story about women, as she felt their stories are often overlooked. Do you believe this to be true? Are men and women equal in modern day society? In what ways are men or women overlooked simply because of their gender?
- What words or images do we associate with each gender? These can relate to the body, jobs, roles in society, etc. Do you think these associations are fair? In what ways are men and women breaking away from stereotypes?

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- In the world of *The Color Purple*, how are gender roles defined? Which characters break free of this society's beliefs about gender? Looking back to your pre-show discussions, in what ways do these depictions support or defy your own beliefs about gender roles?

Adaptations & Relevance Of Contemporary Literature

Pre-Show Questions

- *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel. What can be learned through letters, journal entries, and other firsthand documents that cannot be learned elsewhere? Why might Alice Walker have chosen to write her novel in this style?
- Since its origins as a novel, *The Color Purple* has been adapted into a critically-acclaimed film and Broadway musical. What benefit might there be in translating a literary work into alternate mediums? Discuss some considerations that need to be made when adapting a work between page, film, and stage. What about this story makes it so appealing and accessible for adaptation?

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- *The Color Purple* centers on the lives of African American women at the beginning of the 20th century. Is the story still relevant in contemporary society? What universal truths can be learned from the story that transcend elements of gender, race, and setting?

Epistolary Storytelling

1. Students write journal entries or letters from the perspective of a character from *The Color Purple*. (Avoid Celie or Nettie.) During brainstorming, students should identify specific traits pertaining to their character, including important relationships, worldviews and attitudes, and any observed dialect.
2. Based on their chosen character, students select a theme around which to develop their story. Their story arc should develop over the course of at least three journal entries or letters (a beginning, middle, and end). Suggested themes include: identity and transformation, love and relationships, overcoming oppression, gender roles, and divinity.
3. Once students draft, peer-edit, and revise their stories, students compare and contrast their pieces with one another. They should focus on their creative choices, specifically characters and relationships, theme, use of language and specificity, and plot. Sharing should be open, positive, and productive.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT & RELATIONSHIPS:

Pre-Show Questions

- *The Color Purple* is a “story about love” and presents a cast of characters who exist within a variety of unique relationships. Brainstorm and discuss relationships in your life. How do we categorize and define these relationships? Do we act, dress, and speak the same way in each of these different relationships?

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- Two connected themes throughout *The Color Purple* are identity and transformation. Compare and contrast both Celie’s and Mister’s journeys over the course of the story. How does their development as principal characters influence others and vice versa? Who has changed more? Identify specific character traits to support your argument.

PLAY: Bombs and Shields

Pre-Show Questions

- Participants stand around the room and identify two student “others”: one BOMB and one SHIELD. Once the facilitator says “go”, participants begin walking. Their objective is to keep their SHIELD between their BOMB and themselves at all times, without giving away who their “others” are. Remind participants they cannot stand still, but they may not run. After a minute or two, the facilitator calls “switch”, and players’ BOMBS become their SHIELDS and vice versa. The facilitator may call “freeze” at any point and ask players whether or not they have met their objective. To debrief, participants discuss universal concepts and truths that can be learned from this game, including conflict resolution, flexible thinking, secrets, relationships, objectives, obstacles, tactics, etc.

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- This time, participants choose and embody a character from *The Color Purple* throughout the action of the game. They identify their BOMB and SHIELD in the likeness of another character in the show. Participants must be able to justify, based on the character they have chosen to embody, why they have chosen their BOMB and SHIELD as they did. To debrief, participants discuss their relationship choices, using show-specific evidence as justification.