

# IN REVIEW

THE GAY AND LIVELY ARTS IN AMERICA



WARNER BROS.

## *The Color Purple*

Why did Spielberg gut the story of its most powerful bond, the sexual love between two women?

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STEVEN SPIELBERG'S TINSELED PAEAN TO LOVE  
— BUT NOT OF OUR KIND

Halfway through Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* I was livid. Once again, I thought, he has made a tear-jerker about the ties that bind. Why did he gut the story of its most powerful bond, the sexual love between two women? Surely the director of so many blockbusters could afford to take the risk.

In Alice Walker's wondrous, eponymous novel, the event that changes Celie's life is discovering her passion for another woman, Shug Avery. Celie is Walker's main character — the novel is the story of her life in rural Georgia — and this love is the book's

turning point. In Spielberg's film, their sororal relationship progresses inexplicably, the awakening of passion omitted. The one scene where they tentatively kiss fades to wind chimes and poppy fields. Spielberg offers no follow-up, though Walker had the relationship last for decades, and the peck-and-peck sequence is so isolated and embarrassed one wonders to what it alludes.

In a *New York Times* interview, Spielberg said he "didn't categorize it as a lesbian relationship so much as a love relationship of great need." What love-of-your-life isn't? And besides, Celie never enjoys sex with men and calls their nether parts "frogs." Her preference is clear. Spielberg claims Walker "thinks highly" of the film. Walker refused to comment, saying she wanted to "see it again."



I was not only livid, but hurt, because Spielberg wouldn't allow the love of two women to illuminate or bask in the film's emotional and visual hues. Spielberg, who is forever recreating the world of our childhoods in his fantasy pics, pruned the novel's branching plot and glazed it with *The Wizard of Oz*. Most black farmers during the first decades of this century would have thought they were in the wizard's palace itself had they seen Celie's house with its polished wood interiors, china and rugs. The land around it is lush, fruitful – and dotted with flowers of purple. None of the men, including Danny Glover as Celie's sadistic husband, is as brutal as Walker describes.

Yet, in spite of these flounces, the female figures come through. The affection between teenage Celie (Desreta Jackson) and her younger sister Nettie (Akosua Bursia) has all the giggly intensity of adolescent devotion. Oprah Winfrey, as Sofia, plays the film's comic relief with camp and zest, and its gravest tragedy with simplicity. Though Margaret Avery's portrayal of blues singer Shug lacks punch and passion (the better to temper her love for Celie?), her juke-joint sequences make you want to be there and shimmy. And Whoopi Goldberg's performance as Celie is uncanny.

Celie is a woman so confined by her father's and husband's rage that her information about the world is that of a child. She has few names for things, fewer abstractions and no theories. Her anger, when she can find it, has the spite and pointlessness of a 7-year-old's. She can describe what's directly in front of her, but she hardly ever talks. This is not an easy role to dramatize, yet Goldberg translates Celie's groping interior monologue (which comprises most of the book) into a silent ballet of postures and gestures – each move quiet but clear. Occasionally, Spielberg overdoes it by having the camera underscore "significant" moments. But the women save *Color Purple* from munchkin cuteness (where Spielberg's cinematography might lead it). They keep female perseverance, succor and integrity at the film's center.

The women succeed, that is, for the first two thirds of the story. In the final portion, Spielberg's pruning becomes a hatchet job. He collapses so much material and instantly solves so many problems that the sequence reads like the *New York Times* neediest cases all comfy with their pots of gold. As the film becomes too Emerald City and sinks under the weight of its gems, I was less offended by the whitewash of Shug and Celie's love. But not much. For the voice Walker gives blacks, women, and women

## WHOOPI GOLDBERG: A MAJOR NEW TALENT EMERGES IN *COLOR PURPLE*

It was easy to look askance at Steven Spielberg's film of *The Color Purple* when it was first announced: to doubt that techno-wizard Spielberg could relate to a Southern black milieu, or find the right touch for Alice Walker's achingly sensitive, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, or even work with adult actors, for that matter, as well as he does with creatures and goblins and tow-headed moppets.

But Spielberg, whose reputation has perhaps suffered from the surfeit of mediocre kid-flicks (*Explorers*, *Goonies*) that he produces, has done an extraordinary job. This is one of the most gripping, emotionally satisfying films I've seen in years. Even if you've read the book, as I have, there's little to find fault with here: Menno Meyjes' script compresses the key scenes from Walker's book, and distills her spirit and belief in people's ability to change and grow, with amazing skill.

As Celie, the homely child-woman who suffers under the cruel thumb of her husband (Danny Glover), and later blossoms after meeting the stunning honky-tonk singer, Shug Avery (Margaret Avery), Whoopi Goldberg is everything that fans of her one-woman Broadway show had predicted she would become. Delicate and spare in her expression, and yet tremendously affecting at the right moments, Goldberg can accurately be



Goldberg: Tremendously affecting

called one of the major talents of her generation.

I first saw Goldberg four years ago, when she performed at 544 Natoma, a now-defunct, gay-operated San Francisco performance space. There were 15, maybe 20 people in the converted garage, and Whoopi – who performed six or eight character sketches – was dazzling. Two and a half years later, when I interviewed her for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, I had another glimpse of her genius when I asked her to speak to me in the character of Moms Mabley, the late black comedian whom she was playing on stage at that time.

As Moms, Whoopi spoke of David Kennedy, the son of Robert Kennedy, who had recently died of a heroin overdose: "He didn't die of drugs, honey, really, he died of a broken heart. He saw his Daddy get shot on the tee-vee all alone and didn't talk for three days after that. His life had never been the same."

And there, in the dining room of Goldberg's Berkeley cottage, I choked back the tears.

There's a moment toward the end of *The Color Purple*, when Celie reunites with her family after several decades, when the simple power of Goldberg's talent is most startling. As she runs toward her loved ones through a waist-high field of wildflowers, Goldberg/Celie turns mute from joy and unbottled grief. Beyond tears, beyond words, her wide brow forms a deep wrinkle and she silently embraces her children, beginning to repair the years of separation.

Although Goldberg is the star (she could become the first black actor to win an Oscar since Sidney Poitier got his in 1963), there's really not a bad performance among the lot. Oprah Winfrey, a Chicago talk-show hostess and acting novice, is smashing as the take-no-shit Sofia, and she gives this film a big, robust goosing every time she's on the screen. Margaret Avery is a sinuous, sensuous Shug Avery, and Desreta Jackson and Akosua Busia, as the young Celie and her sister Nettie, are also remarkable. I even liked Danny Glover in the thankless role of the brutal, but ultimately redeemed "Mister," and Adolph Caesar, in the small, comic role of Mister's blustery, befuddled old father.

In a film year that was pitifully short on good character dramas, *The Color Purple* is deeply satisfying in a lingering, distinctly memorable way. In a way that few films ever do – Spielberg's *E.T.* comes to mind, as do *Nights of Cabiria* and *The Member of the Wedding* – it confirms one's faith in the ability of movies to enrich and transform us. It's like good, timeless fiction: surprising, wise and generous.

— Edward Guthmann

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