



Purple Reign

Sunday, June 12, 2016

I attended the European charity premiere of Spielberg's The Color Purple in Leicester Square with my good friend Reinout, who came up to London from his home in Belgium for the occasion, in 1986. At the time, I had no idea what to expect, and I was very taken with the film, so I'm not sure why I didn't get around to writing a review for the [Spielberg Film Society](#). Here's me channeling my 22-year-old self, in Alice Walker mode:

Purple Reign

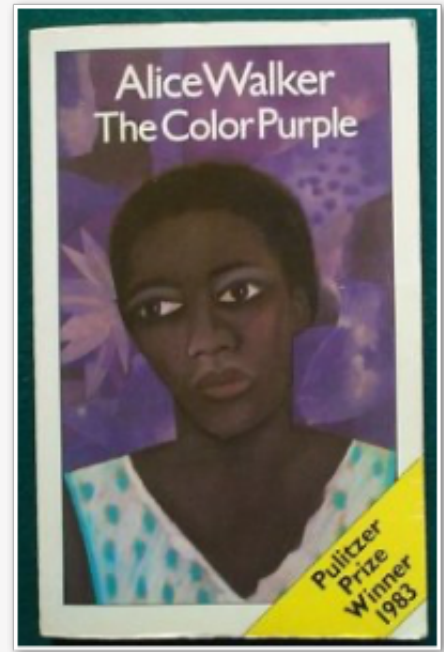
by Joe Fordham (June 2016)

Dear God,

I am 22 years old. I have always been fan of *Jaws*, *E.T.*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and I even ~~loved~~ ~~liked~~ loved *1941*. Then you sent me a sign that Spielberg was gonna make a film of Alice Walker's book, *The Color Purple*. I rushed out to a bookshop on my way home from

work and hunted down a copy. It was a Pulitzer Prize winner so I thought it would not be hard to find. But it was tucked away in the 'special interests' section. The cover had a painting (by Cathie Felstead) of a black sister's face with haunting eyes in a sea of purple flowers, and on the spine was black and white stripes and a steam iron logo: Women's Press. What was this?

When I started reading on the train ride home, I was even more puzzled. This was a first person narrative, diary entries and letters, written by an illiterate girl in the American deep south, self educated, who finds her voice and grows into an articulate and powerful woman over 40 years of hardship and self discovery. It was sad, epic, harsh, explicit, and entirely un-cinematic as the diary entry format evolved into letters and never broke that format.



The book was actually quite brilliant, and many years later (I am no longer 22) the title is perhaps best known as a Broadway musical. The film has gone down in history as having launched the careers of media mogul Oprah Winfrey, who was a Chicago news anchor when Spielberg cast her as Miss Sofia; and Whoopi Goldberg, a New York City comedian. Critics were mostly positive – Roger Ebert of the *Chicago-Sun Times* praised its epic sweep and warmth, while *Variety* called it 'overblown' and the *New York Times* observed that Spielberg had produced a 'multi-hanky entertainment' from Walker's raw prose.

The screenplay by Menno Meyjes was a linear narrative. It opened up the book in ways I had not expected. From the opening moments we're in Spielberg country. We start with simple title graphics over black, with gentle atmospheric sounds of country birdcalls and insects, then fade up to Allen Daviau's soaring camera that swoops and tracks across a sunlit field of purple cosmos flowers, following two girls – Young Celie (Desreta Jackson) and her sister Nettie (Akousha Busia) – as they play a Swahili clapping game. Quincy Jones' score rises, grand and orchestral, until the girls run from the flowers and the camera glides to a stop to reveal Young



Celie, at age 14, is pregnant again by her Pa (Leonard Jackson), a brute of a man, who arrives to order the girls back inside to make dinner.

Spielberg uses Walker's narration in a subsequent scene of Celie walking through a frosty field behind her mother's funeral cortege. It's right out of David Lean (specifically *Doctor*

Zhivago) and anyone who has seen the *Color Purple* documentary clips will know that Alice Walker was present on set, reading from her book as Destrea Jackson walked through that North Carolina field. In fact, the behind the scenes features often showed Spielberg clutching his well-worn hardback copy of Walker's novel, and from the interviews with cast and crew it's clear to see that Walker's words were a constant source of inspiration.

Walker was gracious in interviews, citing her admiration of *E.T.* to explain her endorsement of the film. And Spielberg was equally humble when he explained how the project arrived in his lap, through the urging of Amblin Entertainment producer and den mother Kathleen Kennedy. He was going out on a limb, and so it feels disingenuous to read snarky critics admonishing him for considering the project. It clearly spoke to him, personally – it's no secret Spielberg was victim of childhood anti-Semitic bullying, and the effects of his parents' divorce resonated through *Close Encounters*, *Poltergeist* and *E.T.* – and, professionally, he was looking for a challenge. Following the phenomenon of *E.T.*, he tackled *Temple of Doom* as a favor to his friend George Lucas (I don't think Alice Walker saw that one) and he wanted to stretch his wings.



Spielberg surprised everyone by signing on as director and he took to the project with great gusto. Quincy Jones was attached as producer, and it was a given that he would be scoring the film, so that was another leap of faith, separating Spielberg from his musical spirit animal John Williams. That resulted in a jazz-based score, which I quite enjoyed for its rousing spirituals, Coleman Hawkins numbers and its flavorings of Georges Delerue (a few years later, Williams scored John Singleton's *Rosewood* and proved he would have been more than up to the task of scoring a Southern melodrama).

Casting, Spielberg remarked, was a miraculous experience, and resulted in an epic ensemble: Oprah as the force of nature Miss Sofia, Danny Glover as Celie's monstrous but ultimately pathetic husband, Mister, and Margaret Avery (veteran of one of Spielberg's early TV movies) as the gentle soul of sexy juke-joint singer Shug Avery. And as the adult Miss Celie, Goldberg was a revelation.

A telling scene occurs half way through the film, when Celie, now indentured to Mister, becomes enamored with her husband's lover, Shug, and Shug teaches Celie, for the first



time, how to smile. The film was a corollary for a scene in Walker's novel where Shug teaches Celie about female sexuality, and intimately demonstrates how sex can be a loving experience for a woman. In the movie, Spielberg sets up the scene with a crackling jazz record playing on Shug's bedroom Victrola. The women are playing dress-up.

Timidly, Shug kisses Celie on one cheek. Celie bashfully turns away. Shug kisses Celie's other cheek. Celie turns her head to allow the kissing to continue. Shug kisses her mouth. Celie tries to mask her smile, as her father taught her. Shug removes Celie's hands. The smile that spreads across Celie's face lights up the screen. Spielberg confessed he was shy at depicting the graphic content of the scene, and thus the film received a PG-rating. But what resulted is a powerful, poetic moment of great cinema that is both touching and intimate, and it cuts to the heart of Walker's metaphor.

There are other sequences that are unique to the film. The influence of David Lean, Spielberg's cinematic father, is strong in the film's use of *Oliver Twist* as text for Celie's reading lessons with Nettie – language being a common theme in Spielberg's work. And the use of Lean-ian montage and audio/visual transitions are at times breathtaking: a closeup of a rotating tractor wheel strobes into the foreboding staccato rhythms of Mister's horse's hooves when he is stalking or attempting to woo Young Celie. Or when Celie is near breaking point, after Mister's incessant bullying, and she contemplates murder as Mister demands his straight-razor shave ('You cut me, I'll kill you'), Spielberg crosscuts the porch scene with a Southern storm brewing in the sky as Shug senses something is wrong and runs in to halt Celie. We also get more backstory with Shug, delving into the singer's relationship with her estranged pastor father. And perhaps most stunning of all is the moment when Celie discovers letters from Nettie that Mister has hidden from her for years, and Spielberg articulates the emotional floodgates in a montage of scenes that make dazzling juxtapositions of Celie's domestic life with scenes of Nettie growing up in Africa.



But most powerful are the moments that remain core to Walker's story. When Miss Sofia is



seated at a noisy dinner table, she looks down and sees her face reflected in her dinner plate, distorted like a funhouse mirror, revealing that her spirit has been broken after her own once-beloved husband has beaten her. Then Celie speaks out. She stands up to Mister and then, for the first time in years, Sofia starts to laugh and the tears come. On the face of it, the scene is nothing more than a dozen people sitting at a table

talking, but Spielberg orchestrates events in spectacular fashion.

When Celie faces Mister's admonition ('You're black, you're poor, you're ugly, you're a woman, you're nothin' at all!') and she leaves, the film embarks on its final journey toward emancipation and freedom. It's a liberating moment in a rich and satisfying film – soulful, cinematic, but novelistic in its scope, and full of a love of life and literature that is infectious and deserves celebrating.



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