

Royal 'Purple' opens at Belk

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Theater Critic

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Blumenthal Performing Arts Center must be dedicating its spring-summer season to female self-empowerment.

From April through August, every month in the Broadway Lights Series brings a show in which women find their voices, their reasons for existence. Men around them are usually predatory, unbalanced or clueless impediments to self-fulfillment, but women are the shining centers of all these plays.

The theme began in "Legally Blonde" and will reappear in "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Mamma Mia!" But there's no clearer depiction of it than "The Color Purple," now running at Belk Theater and returning for a week in August.

This musical plays its religious card early and often: The first number soars into a gospel song, and the final tableau ends with a rich, quiet "Amen." (It could also be taken as a wise and forgiving sigh: "Ah, men.")

The play takes elements from Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel and Steven Spielberg's Oscar-nominated movie, which was shot in nearby Anson County 24 years ago. Yet there's a stronger spiritual message than in either of those sources. Only as Celie (Kenita R. Miller) learns to "let go and let God," as the faithful say, can she find joy.

And she has much to forget. Her stepfather rapes her twice before her 15th birthday, sends her two kids away, then sells her to a neighbor called Mister (Rufus Bonds Jr.), who treats her as a slave. (The play takes place in rural Georgia between 1909 and 1949, so older characters can recall actual slavery.)

Mister hides letters from Nettie (LaToya London), Celie's sister, so Celie doesn't know she's become a missionary in Africa who's raising Celie's children. Meanwhile, stepson Harpo (Brandon Victor Dixon) carries on Mister's tradition by beating his own wife, Sofia (Felicia P. Fields). She proves too much for Harpo but not for white society, which punishes her for resisting it.

Yet this is a world where love conquers all, and I mean *all*. Forgiveness – the divine kind of love, inspired by God – lets this community come together at last with each member physically healed, benevolent and at peace with old foes. No one is allowed to fail or go on suffering or abandon hope. It's a happy dream, unrealistic but satisfying in its childlike way.

Composer-lyricists Brenda Russell, Allee Willis and Stephen Bray bring an uplifting feeling to almost every song: Even “Big Dog,” a warning to Celie that Mister will make her life hell, has a roaring energy.

Playwright Marsha Norman has changed the focus of the story by eliminating whites altogether: They're a distant, unsettling presence but never appear, as they did in the book and film. These black characters in the Jim Crow-era South can control their destinies only when whites aren't around, and they hurt each other and fix each other up in private.

Not one performance is stale, though many veterans of the Broadway cast have come out on this tour. They include Fields, a gravel-voiced comedian whose enormous self-confidence and sass remind me of the great Jackie Gleason, and Angela Robinson, whose Shug Avery casts a spell over men and women alike. “Push Da Button,” her raucously sexy blues number, has the most authentic period feel of any song here. (“The Color Purple” is often frank about sex and violence, though the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug is only strongly implied.)

Miller, who played Celie on Broadway, is superb. Pure innocence is almost impossible to depict onstage, but she does it with wide-eyed gentleness that never cloys: When Mister hits her, it's like seeing someone slap a kitten. And when she lifts her voice in triumph at last, she sounds like she's ready to crack the vault of heaven unless God answers her prayers.