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Friday, May 16, 2008

'Color Purple' comes home

Lawrence B. Johnson / Special to The Detroit News

'The Color Purple' is coming home to Detroit.

The Broadway musical, nominated for 11 Tony Awards in 2007, has a special bond with Motown. Two of the three composer/lyricists who transformed Alice Walker's 1982 novel and Steven Spielberg's 1985 film into a stage hit are Detroit natives.

For Stephen Bray and Allee Willis, who both now live in Los Angeles, having their show open Tuesday at the Fox Theatre is a big deal.

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"I know being at the Fox will bring back huge childhood memories," says Willis, who will attend the opening night performance and speak at her alma mater, Mumford High School. "Just being involved with this show has been an unbelievable opportunity."

Which is saying something for a songwriter who has sold 50 million records, including hits by Earth, Wind & Fire, the Pointer Sisters and Pet Shop Boys. Willis also won a Grammy for the "Beverly Hills Cop" soundtrack and received an Emmy nomination for the theme from "Friends."

Bray's career soared when he collaborated with Madonna on a string of hits in the 1980s. He recalls his Detroit childhood with wry affection. "I'm proud that I grew up practically across the street from the Fox Theater -- on Oakland Boulevard, between Dexter and Linwood. I'm a core inner-city guy. I was 11 years old when they burned down Dexter in 1967. We had tanks in the backyard."

He calls the creation-by-committee of "The Color Purple," with Willis and Brenda Russell, the third team member, "a sort of Vulcan mind-meld. The lyrics, tunes, scoring -- we all did it together, which means it took a while but maybe that was good for the show in the end. It's the most fun I've ever had."

Willis remembers that hammering-out process as "a roller-coaster ride with emotions in full swing. We'd go from sad to laughing hysterically. I'd never written a Broadway show. I'm proud of the effect 'The Color Purple' has on audiences. It's true soul music."

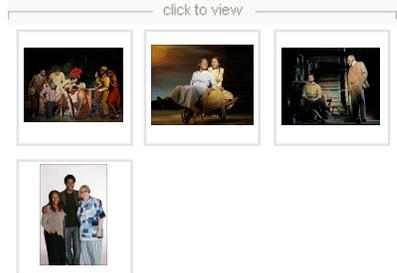
Walker's story, set in rural Georgia between 1909 and 1949, centers on the trials and spiritual triumph of one good and true soul, a black woman called Celie. Reviled as ugly and bargained into marital slavery by her abusive father, Celie survives extreme hardship and humiliation to find love, self-esteem and even personal success -- largely as the result of her complicated relationship with a gorgeous lounge singer called Shug Avery.

"Celie meets various people who pull out her better qualities, but Shug shows her her inner beauty," says Jeannette Bayardelle, who played Celie on Broadway and reprises the role in this touring production. "The composers have done a fantastic job capturing the changes she goes through, from innocence to her last song, 'I Am Here,' when she finally feels like a beautiful person."

Angela Robinson, another veteran of the show's 15-month Broadway run from December 2006 to last February, portrays Shug -- a flamboyant and plain-spoken woman who lives on the wild side but proves to be just as hungry for genuine affection as Celie.



"The Color Purple" Touring Company perform "Push da Button," featuring Angela Robinson, center, as Shug Avery. (Paul Kolnik)



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Preview

'The Color Purple'

7:30 p.m. Tuesday, through June 1
Fox Theatre
2211 Woodward Ave., Detroit
Tickets: \$39.50-\$75
Call (248) 433-1515 or visit www.olympiaentertainment.com

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"Shug is her own woman, very honest and extremely sensible," says Robinson. "But everyone she's ever been involved with has wanted something from her -- sex or whatever. Celie cares for her because she is a decent human being. They form a strong bond, and fall in love."

It is Shug's spirited chiding of Celie, for wearing a skirt instead of pants for working in the fields, that sets Celie on the path to independence. She makes herself some pants, then begins fashioning pants to sell. The pants motif, says Robinson, is a multifaceted symbol of Celie's emergence.

"Pants represent her strengths and her sexuality," she says. "It's about a lot of things, but certainly about finding her place and herself in a man's world."

Both actors agree "The Color Purple" -- the musical, the film and the book -- holds special meaning for African Americans, on both sides of the footlights. While Broadway in general are mostly white, this show has drawn consistently large black crowds.

"I've done all kinds of theater, but this is a different feeling for me," says Robinson. "I remember looking out into that Broadway audience and thinking, 'Wow, now my mom will really know what I do for a living.' Everyone in the family back in Florida came to New York to see the show."

Walker's tale is "part of our history, part of who we are," says Bayardelle. "There aren't too many African Americans who haven't seen the movie. So this musical really becomes a special event. I went to a school here in Baltimore (the show's stop before Detroit) and talked to about 500 African-American students. They'd all seen the movie and could recite favorite lines. It's just a great story."

Lawrence B. Johnson is a Detroit-based cultural writer and critic. You can reach him at [lawrencebj@gmail.com](mailto:lawrencebj@gmail.com).

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