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Review of Color Purple for Gay Community News (Dec 1985-Jan 1986)

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Community News, December 28 & January 4, 1985-'86

Where are all the independent women?

Spielberg's *Color Purple*, Not Walker's

The Color Purple, directed by Steven Spielberg and produced by Quincy Jones. With Whoopi Goldberg, Margaret Avery, Danny Glover, Tata Vega, and Desreta Jackson. At Sack Cheri, Boston Cinema, Chestnut Hill Cinema, and Harvard Square Theater.

By Angela Bowen

The flyleaf of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* calls the book "honest, poignant, laughing, defiant...a story about heroic lives, love, and the nature of God.... It breaks new ground in fiction with its portrayal of the bonding of women." Seems to me Steven Spielberg (director) and Quincy Jones (producer) of the recently released film version of Walker's book could do with some understanding of those words, particularly about the "nature of

of color? When you get to the level we're talking about it's all merit. You don't give this remarkable book to someone because of race or sex [emphasis mine]. You give it to the best to get the best out of it. The complaining is just plain bull."

It's difficult to see the social conscience that Walker ascribes to Jones, when he doesn't even entertain the notion that Black people should have a concern, let alone Black women. Black women finally see ourselves portrayed in a blockbuster of a bestseller as the positive, loving, scrapping, strong women we are, who support, teach, laugh with, and rely on one another throughout our lives. *The Color Purple* is the story of a woman's steady climb out of a desperate and intolerable life imposed upon her by men. There's

even considered leaving it out.

Of course, as these incidents were left out, more was being added to show us that Celie's husband, Mister (Danny Glover), was changing and growing, and we were made to pay attention to his transformation throughout, rather than to Celie's.

Celie's passionate sexual awakening with Shug (Margaret Avery) is reduced to a couple of very chaste kisses. We never see the real development of their sexual relationship. The audience is not allowed to know that they become lovers, sleep together consistently, and eventually live together away from Mister. Spielberg treats their relationship as if they had a fling one day and then became like sisters.

But the most glaring omission was of that classic conversation be-



Whoopi Goldberg (left), as Celie, and Margaret Avery, as Shug, exchange a loving glance in *The Color Purple*.

God" and the "bonding of women." They either couldn't or wouldn't address these themes with any depth.

In a December *MS* magazine article, Walker says she trusts the men doing the film. Acknowledging that a woman director would have placed more emphasis on the women, she suggests that Spielberg was more interested in showing the transformation of Mister and says it doesn't bother her much. At least Walker understands the terms of the debate. Neither Spielberg nor Jones does. They think the issue is race. In a Boston *Globe* interview on Dec. 16, Spielberg states, "This movie is more about humanity than it is about race...I wouldn't have presumed...to have stepped in..." And from Quincy Jones (whose involvement in the project helped to secure Walker's participation), "Who thinks someone else could have made a better movie because

no way to get around that simple reality. And every time she makes another step, a woman helps her do it. Then she grows strong enough to offer other women some wisdom.

Of course, in making a movie from a book that covers so many years and characters, choices had to be made, and Spielberg made some choices that Walker feels he had every right to. But it does seem odd that the choices always involved a decision not to show scenes where women contributed to the evolution of Celie (the lead character, played by Whoopi Goldberg). But it feels quite deliberate for him to include the parts where Sofia confronts Celie and tells her off for suggesting that her husband (Celie's stepson) beat her, and yet not finish the scene to include Celie's apology and their making up and becoming closer as a result. That incident told a lot about Celie's character, and you can't tell me a woman would have

tween Shug and Celie about the meaning of God. Why would anyone (or maybe the question is how *could* anyone) make a two-and-a-half hour film of *The Color Purple* and not include the centerpiece that pulls it all together? Maybe because if Spielberg had used the discussion from the book in its entirety, we would have had to hear Celie talk about a white male God who never listens to a poor Black woman. That's pretty threatening stuff, particularly for most of Spielberg's audience who, he admits, have never seen him do anything heavy. We also have to hear Shug's philosophy on God, love, and freedom, which would never do in light of the nonsense he decided to slip into the film about Shug. Who could have been ready for this?

Although Shug may seem to us like the quintessential free woman, loving men and women at her will, Spielberg decides that she's pining

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for the love of her preacher father, chasing after him throughout the movie as she repeatedly seeks his forgiveness for her sinful ways. She even goes so far as to run after him waving her wedding band at him, shouting, "I'm married now." He rides by, his face turned away from her in disdain. She finally corners him and forces a reconciliation that can only be described as one of Spielberg's "Amazing Stories."

Notice that I didn't tell you where she finally catches up with him. That's because I know you're going to see it. What the heck! Whoopi Goldberg is fine. But we knew that anyway, right? Danny Glover is just fine, too. Margaret Avery (Shug) is fine. Tata Vega (the voice of Shug) is mighty fine. And Desreta Jackson, who played young Celie, is a wonderful actor I hope I'll get to see sometime again. Of course, parts for Black actors being as scarce as they are, that's a dim hope.

And the music and the cinematography are all as delightful as we expected them to be. But I've got a little trouble with the sweeping, panoramic view of grass and sky so early on in the movie. It was too grand and wide for the prevailing mood of fear and despair that sets the opening scenes. The cameras did nothing to convey the feeling of confinement of Celie's life and spirit that began the story. But then, what do I know? Quincy said Spielberg was the best.

When Quincy Jones asked Walker what her fears were about seeing the film done, she said she feared "them" (whites, one must presume in the context of the piece) embarrassing "us." Jones



Whoopi Goldberg as Celie

assured her he would not let that happen. Well, they didn't. They didn't embarrass "us" women, either. The men embarrassed no one but themselves. To have pursued a woman whose book won a Pulitzer and a National Book Award to beg for the right to make a movie of her work; to promise to leave the integrity of the book intact and then to rewrite essential pieces for whatever reasons you might tell yourself you have; strikes me as artistically insulting, misogynistic, and homophobic. But then, who am I? Just one of the thousands who have read and loved everything Walker's written and who's read *The Color Purple* four times. I didn't really expect to see "my" movie made. And I was right. But Quincy Jones says Spielberg's the best. Whoopi Goldberg thinks this will bring him an Oscar. And Walker says Spielberg thinks with his heart. So if they're satisfied...