

A CURVE AND BIRMINGHAM HIPPODROME CO-PRODUCTION



The Color Purple

THE MUSICAL

BASED UPON THE NOVEL WRITTEN BY ALICE WALKER AND THE WARNER BROS./AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT MOTION PICTURE
BOOK BY MARSHA NORMAN MUSIC & LYRICS BY BRENDA RUSSELL, ALLEE WILLIS & STEPHEN BRAY

THE COLOR PURPLE was produced on Broadway at the Broadway Theater by Oprah Winfrey, Scott Sanders, Roy Furman and Quincy Jones. The world premiere of THE COLOR PURPLE was produced by the Alliance Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia.
THE COLOR PURPLE is presented through special arrangement with Theatrical Rights Worldwide, 1180 Avenue of the Americas, Suite 640, New York, NY 10036. www.theatricalrights.com



LEARNING PACK 2022

Written and collated by Ashlee Elizabeth-Lolo
with support from Birmingham Hippodrome and Curve



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INTRODUCTIONS

A very warm welcome to this learning pack, which accompanies our new England and Wales tour of **Marsha Norman, Brenda Russell, Allee Willis & Stephen Bray's** Tony-award winning musical ***The Color Purple***.

It is a huge thrill for all of us at **Curve** and **Birmingham Hippodrome** to present this great musical for audiences to enjoy. After the unprecedented events of the past years, the musical's message of solidarity, unity and accepting who you truly are, has never felt more important or relevant. The Civil Rights Movement and rights of LGBT+ people have been intertwined over many decades of persecution and struggle; the character of Celie represents many of these struggles and **Alice Walker's** novel celebrates the progress made, whilst exposing battles still to be won.

We are proud these voices collide in this extraordinary musical and the memories of people who have fought injustice, people of colour and the LGBT community, are all celebrated so vividly in this story. We hope the information will offer a practical understanding of how we make our productions and the skills and techniques designers, actors, directors, composers and production teams use when creating a production.

There are sections we hope will aid your exploration, enjoyment and understanding of the musical, such as character breakdowns, a synopsis of the story, historical context from the period the musical is set, and information about the themes in the story. These things were all incredibly helpful in rehearsals, especially as our understanding of the complexity of the characters deepened. We hope you enjoy the videos, classroom activity ideas and photographs to support your understanding of our process.

No production of *The Color Purple* could happen without an incredible cast and company bringing it to life on stage. In Alice Walker's original novel and this musical, the actress playing Celie has inevitably provided the heartbeat and soul of the production and **Me'sha Bryan** plays this iconic role and makes it her own with such a beautiful performance. *The Color Purple* is an astonishing musical and all of us are proud to see such beautiful work happening in Birmingham and up and down the country on its first England and Wales tour. Alongside Me'sha are a company of astonishing actors – dazzling talent – and it is a pleasure to welcome the entire cast, crew and musicians to Birmingham and marvel at their truly world-class work.

We first saw **Tinuke Craig's** work at Chichester Festival Theatre, where Tinu directed acclaimed productions of debbie tucker green's plays *random* and *generations*. The productions were directed with such searing intelligence, imagination and sensitivity, that it meant Tinuke was the ideal choice to work on this major revival of *The Color Purple* in 2019 which went on to win the WhatsOnStage Award for Best Regional Production. We are also delighted to welcome **Lakesha Arie-Angelo** as revival director as this production goes from strength to strength, and we are sure you will agree, Lakesha and her team have done great work and created a piece all of us in the Midlands can be proud of.

A large-scale production like this cannot happen without partners and in addition to the incredible creative talents of those mentioned above, and we are also thrilled to have the support of **PPL PRS**, whose sponsorship enables us to recruit Community Ambassadors in different cities and engage in audience development activities with local communities all across the country.

Our thanks also go to **Steve Spiegel** and his team at **Theatrical Rights Worldwide**, and **Arts Council England's National Lottery Funding**, which has enabled us to visit six new cities across England and Wales with this incredible piece of theatre.

Enjoy the show and share its songs of freedom and equality in your communities, wherever you are.



Curve and Birmingham Hippodrome

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I came to this project by **Tinuke Craig** who asked if I would like to take the baton as Revival Director. As Tinuke gave her best sales pitch to try to convince me to consider the job, I had already said 'yes' in my head – she had me at the words *The Color Purple*. The **Alice Walker** novel was one of my favourites as a young teen, I spent a whole summer with my nose in the book – totally engrossed and moved by the tale of love and loss. I then later discovered the film which equally captivated my heart. When the original musical cast recording became available for the first time in the early noughties, I found myself listening to it back-to-back on repeat imagining how I would direct the musical numbers. To say working on this production is a lifelong dream come true is an understatement and to have the pleasure of opening at **Birmingham Hippodrome**; a place that helped shape my love of theatre as a kid, is a real honour and privilege.

It's been a thrilling rollercoaster ride of discovery, laughter, play and curiosity as we carefully pieced together our wonderful show. As this has been a bit of a hybrid of old and new, we have had the challenge and privilege of creating a version of *The Color Purple* that echoes back to the original 2019 production, whilst honouring a newer team and vision. It was useful to have the 2019 version as a framework which still allowed the new cast and crew to bring new or different interpretations and skills to the piece. This meant we could keep the story feeling relevant and place the company's unique artistic fingerprints on the show. We worked diligently over a few weeks learning the music with **Ian Oakley**, our Musical Director, and **Alex Parker**, Music Supervisor. **Mark Smith** brought in **ACE Dance Company** to support us in incorporating more African influenced dance moves and physical vocabulary to sprinkle throughout the show. I worked with the cast to bring their characters to life and ensured the story beats felt clear and aligned with the overall vision.

As *The Color Purple* touches on themes of community and connection, the most memorable moments in rehearsal have been when we have collectively laughed, cried and celebrated together. Each rehearsal day usually started with laughter as we did a group check in, or enjoyed moments where a warm up might end up in with an improvised 'Twerk-off'. At other times we found ourselves shedding a few tears, especially when we rehearsed the reunion between Celie and Nettie that reminded us of sibling love, hope and community.

There is a significance in *The Color Purple* being shared around the UK this year, considering the recent years we have faced as a global collective. Although the story is in essence a period drama, it's a universal story that speaks right across the ages. In a time where we have witnessed or experienced much hardship, grief and division, it feels really key for the artistic work that we engage with to galvanise, inspire and empower us, and *The Color Purple* story and production feels it can do just that. As my predecessor Tinuke Craig has articulated so astutely: "Celie navigates being Black in a white supremacist world, being woman in a man's world, poor in a capitalist world and queer in a world where that's not even presented as a possibility for her" and with that sentiment, I hope this story reaches those who have ever felt unrepresented or voiceless and can demonstrate a version of overcoming obstacles through hope and love.

We really appreciate everyone who comes to see the show and engages with this supporting pack. This production is a labour of love and we hope that it is received as such and that positive energy continues to ripple through as far and wide as possible.

Lakesha-Arie-Angelo



SYNOPSIS

Trigger warnings: This section touches on themes such as sexual abuse, physical assault and racial violence.

The Color Purple has been adapted from a novel to film (which incorporated elements of music) to this form as Musical Theatre.

The bulk of the storyline is skilfully woven into the lyrics, which fluctuate in melody and rhyme to mimic the tone, emotion and pace of the story. Here's an in-depth synopsis of the musical with the song numbers included.



ACT I

Before the story begins, Celie has had one child, whom she named Olivia. At the beginning of the musical, Celie (now aged fourteen) has another child, whom she names Adam. The father of the children is the man Celie believes is her own father, Pa. Pa has taken both of Celie's children away from her and she doesn't know whether they are dead or alive. She also lives with her sister, Nettie.

Songs heard:

- *Opening Act One*
- *Somebody Gonna Love You*

A local widower called Mister asks Pa for Nettie's hand in marriage but receives Celie's instead. Celie arrives at Mister's farm to find it unkept and unloved. Mister and Celie do not have a happy life together as Mister treats Celie very badly.

Songs heard:

- *Our Prayer*
- *That Fine Mister*
- *Big Dog*

Nettie comes to stay with Mister and Celie for a time. But once Mister tries to attack Nettie, she leaves for good. She promises to write to Celie.

Songs heard:

- *Mister-Nettie*
- *Lily Of The Field*

Harpo (Mister's son) brings home a lady called Sofia. They marry but their union quickly sours. Celie's advice to Harpo (that he should beat his wife to make her obedient) makes things worse.

Songs heard:

- *Sofia*
- *Dear God-Sofia*
- *A Tree Named Sofia*
- *Hell No!*

Harpo makes a juke joint out of his old home with Sofia, and finds a new love interest, Squeak.

Songs heard:

- *Brown Betty (Part 1-2-3)*

Shug Avery (Mister's mistress) arrives in town stays with Mister and Celie. Shug is unwell and Celie helps nurse her back to health.

Songs heard:

- *Shug Avery Comin' To Town*

Celie befriends Shug and discloses her past with Nettie.

Songs heard:

- *All We Got To Say*
- *Dear God-Shug*

Old Mister (Mister's Father) learns of Shug residing with his son. Shug dispels Celie's lack of self-confidence by reassuring her of her beauty

Songs heard:

- *Too Beautiful For Words*

Shug sings at Harpo's juke joint. Sofia returns with a new love interest, making Harpo jealous. Squeak becomes angry which leads to a fight.

Songs heard:

- *Push Da Button (including dance)*
- *Uh-Oh*

Shug tells Celie she's going back on the road. Shug and Celie reveal they have romantic feelings for each other. Shortly after, Shug reveals she's found letters addressed to Celie. Celie discovers Nettie is alive.

Songs heard:

- *What About Love?*
- *Finale Act One*

ACT II

Celie reads Nettie's letter. Nettie states she found refuge with a local Reverend who was travelling to Africa on a missionary trip. Nettie reveals Celie's children are alive and with her in Africa. Meanwhile, Sofia has been imprisoned for refusing to become a maid. Celie and Harpo both visit Sofia in jail and Celie is distressed by Sofia's broken spirit.

Songs heard:

- *Africa (Part One)*
- *Africa (Part Two)*
- *We Walk Away*

Celie begins writing to Nettie again. She declares she'll write to her sister every day until they meet again.

Shug returns for Mister's Easter dinner. Shug is now married to a man named Grady. At the dinner table, Celie reveals her knowledge of the hidden letters and in turn curses Mister for his wrongdoing. She leaves Mister and heads to Memphis with Shug and Squeak.

Songs heard:

- *The Color Purple-Shug*
- *It's Easter Sunday*
- *End Easter Dinner*

Mister's life takes a downward spiral whilst Celie's life begins to flourish. She inherits her father's house and store. She transforms it into a boutique selling pants (trousers).

Songs heard:

- *Mister's Nightmare*
- *Mister Song*
- *Letter To Nettie*
- *In Miss Celie's Pants*

Harpo and Sofia fall in love again.

Songs heard:

- *Any Little Thing*

Shug announces she's leaving again, which breaks Celie's heart. Mister apologises to Celie and begs for her hand in marriage, but Celie says they should just be friends.

Songs heard:

- *What About Love (Reprise)*
- *I'm Here*

Nettie returns with Celie's children, Adam and Olivia. Finally, her family are reunited.

Songs heard:

- *Reunion (Underscore)*
- *The Color Purple*
- *Bows (The Color Purple)*

Song numbers



You
Tube





ALICE WALKER BIOGRAPHY

Alice Walker was born on 9th February 1944 in segregated Eatonton, Georgia, USA, the last of eight children and daughter of a share-cropper.

After losing an eye in an accident at the age of eight, she immersed herself in her studies and took full advantage of educational opportunities, although she and her mother had to fight for her to stay in school.

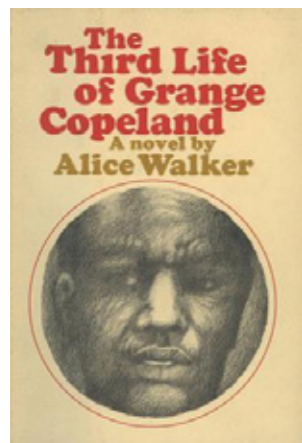
In 1964 she left Georgia having won a scholarship; first to Spelman, a leading Black college, then to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. She became a political activist and returned to the southern states in the late 1960s to campaign for civil rights, as well as teaching and writing poetry and short stories.

In 1968 she married Melvyn Leventhal, a human rights lawyer, and they had a daughter, Rebecca. It was the first interracial marriage in Mississippi but the couple divorced in the early 1970s.

Her first novel, published in 1970, was *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In 1982, Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* was published. Walker published several more novels, as well as a sequel to *The Color Purple* called *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

Walker has also published several short story collections and poetry and released new novels as recently as 2013. Walker's writing focusses heavily on themes of sexism and racism and specifically on the lives of Black women in America.

In her own words: "I would like to call myself revolutionary, for I am always changing and growing, it is hoped for the good of more black people... the truest and most enduring impulse I have is simply to write... Our people are waiting."



CHARACTER BREAKDOWNS



Trigger warnings: This section touches on themes such as sexual abuse, physical assault and racial violence.

Protagonist or ensemble, each character in *The Color Purple* is **vital** in the retelling of its story.

In this section, we'll be breaking down characters' arcs and hearing from the actors who illuminate the personality, motivations, and obstacles of each character.

CHARACTERS IN THE MUSICAL

CELIE	A woman from Georgia whose story begins when she is fourteen years old
NETTIE	Celie's younger sister
PA	Celie and Nettie's father
MISTER	A local farm owner who becomes Celie's husband
HARPO	Mister's son from his first marriage
SOFIA	Harpo's wife
SHUG AVERY	Mister's long-time love, a singer who lives in Memphis
CHURCH LADIES	Jarene, Doris, Darlene
ENSEMBLE	The Preacher, the Field Hands, the Church Soloist, Adam, Olivia, Squeak and Grady, Ol' Mister and others in the community

Celie



Main connections within the story:

Shug, Nettie, Sofia, Adam and Olivia

Celie's storyline:

Celie starts out as a young girl who is being raised in a nest of abuse (mental, physical, and sexual) which results in the birth of her two children Adam and Olivia.

Although life is hard, she relies on the love and solidarity of her sister, Nettie. As the story progresses, Celie and Nettie are torn apart which leaves Celie devastated and questioning God's existence.

However, as the story develops, Celie finds her voice through friendship and challenging the ruling powers in her life such as Mister. Once the tie with her husband is broken, Celie is free to reconnect with Nettie and her children.

Throughout the piece, Celie is on a quest to understand God and to find love through female characters such as Shug, Sofia and eventually herself.

What does her character represent:

Although Celie is poor and uneducated, her resilience gives her the skills to learn how to read and gain an advantage over her captors (mainly her husband Mister). Throughout the piece, Celie sheds the words that were used to define her. She moves from pain to peace, loathing to love and from isolation to intimacy with her family and God.

Provocations:

- What words would you use to describe Celie's character and why?
- Who are the main characters that act as obstacles in Celie achieving her goals?
- What techniques does the writer use to encourage us to feel sympathy for Celie's character?
- Suggest a style or genre of music or even dance that might suit/represent this character?

Nettie



Main connections in the story:

Celie, Adam, Olivia, Minister's wife and Pastor

Nettie's storyline:

Although Nettie was raised in the same environment as Celie, she was not subject to the same level of abuse. This is due to Celie bearing the brunt of the abuse to shield Nettie from its effects, demonstrating Celie's deep love for her younger sibling. As the story progresses, Celie is sold into marriage with Mister, leaving Nettie vulnerable at the hands of her stepfather. Nettie seeks sanctuary with Celie in her new home but the safety was short lived. Mister (Celie's husband) makes his attraction known to Nettie which is quickly turned down. Mister is insulted by this and banishes her from his land. Celie and Nettie are separated.

Nettie's journey takes her from the Deep South to the heart of Africa where she encounters the effects of religion and colonialism. Nettie writes to Celie about her experiences, but her letters are hidden by Mister. Eventually, Nettie is reunited with her sister and the audience experiences a sense of relief and joy knowing the sisters are connected once again.

What does this character represent:

Nettie represents resistance to male authority especially her stepfather and Mister. Whilst it is empowering to see a Black female fight back, it wouldn't have been possible without the sacrifice Celie made by absorbing the literal and metaphorical blows from men. Overall, Nettie personifies the freedom and beauty of Black femininity when nurtured in love and acceptance.

Provocations:

- Explore the similarities and differences between Celie and Nettie's letters (which are sung in the piece). Pay close attention to the:
- Language • Tone • Melody • Topic/Themes
 - Although Nettie is in Africa, there are some notable similarities between Olinka and America. What are some of the similarities and how does the writer/songwriter display this?

Pa (Alphonso)



Main connections in the story:

Celie and Nettie

Pa's storyline: Pa (aka Alphonso) is one of the first characters introduced to us on stage. He is the stepfather of Celie and Nettie and is their sole carer. However, he abuses his position and molests Celie resulting in two children, Adam and Olivia. He doesn't allow Celie to raise her children and separates them at birth. He gives his children to a local missionary's wife who's unable to have children.

Alphonso is not seen on stage again after the first few scenes, but his impact is felt throughout the whole piece. Being subject to such abuse and degradation sets the tone for Celie's path. Not long after giving birth, Celie is given in marriage (as a replacement for Nettie) to Mister, who also treats her badly. We can also attribute Celie's lack of self-confidence and inability to express her true self to her upbringing by Pa.

Later in the musical, we learn of Alphonso's death. Celie inherits the house she grew up in and goes back to claim it as her own.

What does this character represent:

Pa's character represents male dominance and abuse of authority. His job as a paternal figure is to protect and raise his stepdaughters from harm. However, he actively brings danger into their home and is unapologetic about his crimes. There is no evidence in the original text or the musical that shows remorse from Alphonso, meaning he died without forgiveness. Symbolically, Pa represents a stubborn and harmful system of patriarchy which will never relent or repent for its effects on society.

Provocations:

- What ideas or beliefs do we have in British society that are harmful to minorities communities e.g. global majority communities, LGBTQ+, faith groups etc?

Mister



Main connections in the story:

O' Mister, Shug and Harpo

Mister's storyline:

Mister (affectionately known as Albert) is a widowed father who's in desperate need of a wife. At first, he approaches Alphonso (Celie and Nettie's stepfather) with the intention of marrying Nettie. When Alphonso refuses, he offers Celie as a replacement. Mister reluctantly accepts and marries Celie but their union is far from harmonious. Celie becomes a glorified maid, charged with taking care of Mister's children (Harpo being the eldest). We see glimpses of Mister's personality come through as he degrades Celie for example when he says "...You poor, you Black, you ugly... you nothing at all".

As the story progresses, Mister's ex Shug Avery comes crashing into the couple's life. It is revealed Mister has always loved Shug and that she brings out a softer side in Mister that we have not seen previously. Mister is deeply unhappy with his status in life, and this is projected onto others in his immediate circle. His journey forces him into humility especially when he confronted with his crimes against Celie. Once Mister makes amends his wrongdoing, he experiences elements of peace and reunites Celie and Nettie back together once more.

What does this character represent:

Mister personifies the male dominance which oppresses almost every female character in the story (with the exclusion of Miss Millie who is a White woman and wife of the Mayor). He also represents toxic masculine values such as disregarding female thought.

Provocations:

- Look closely at the relationship between O' Mister and Mister. What similarities can you find between the two characters?
- Why does Mister disapprove of Harpo's union with Sofia?
- Why do you think Celie continues to call Mister by his title and not his first name? (what does this show about their relationship?)



Harpo



Main connections in the story:
Sofia, Celie, Squeak and Ol' Mister

Harpo's storyline:

Harpo is the eldest of Mister's children. He's raised by Celie (which is chaotic at first) but they develop a loving relationship as the story progresses. He falls in love with a headstrong, outspoken woman called Sofia who Mister instantly dislikes. Despite his father's warnings, Harpo marries her, but they begin to butt heads about gender roles. Harpo seeks advice about how to "handle" Sofia's large personality. Both Mister and Celie advise Harpo to "beat her". This results in Sofia fighting back and leaving Harpo, demonstrating the failure of toxic masculinity in relationships.

Whilst having an on/off relationship with Sofia, he starts a relationship with a woman named Squeak who embodies traditional female values (not speaking back and being submissive to men) but his heart will always belong to Sofia. The story shows Harpo's shedding of gender expectations and by the end of the piece, we see a man who is more comfortable within his role in his relationship which values equality between both men and women.

What does this character represent:

Male dominance and patriarchal values have been forced on Harpo by his father and grandfather. However, Harpo doesn't completely believe in the gender norms his family and society have placed on him and we can see this through his choice of marital partner and the roles he plays within their marriage. It is clear Harpo enjoys domestic activities such as cleaning and cooking, which makes him a perfect match for Sofia, but this still plays on his conscience. His character represents the battle between societal expectations and the desire to define his life on his own terms.

Provocations:

- Why do you think Harpo listened to Celie's advice about "beating" Sofia?
- Topic for Discussion: What are some of the expectations society places on men in the 21st century?

Sofia



Main connections in the story:
Harpo and Celie

Sofia's storyline:

Sofia is an outspoken, unapologetic woman who falls in love with Harpo. Contrary to traditional gender roles, Sofia exhibits a modern version of femininity in a time where men and women were not seen as equal. This causes friction in her marriage when the weight of family's expectation has physical and long-term effects on their relationship. Both parties enter extramarital relationships; Sofia's choice being a boxer who is huge in stature but soft in nature. This is juxtaposed by Harpo's choice of partner (Squeak) who is the opposite of Sofia but a replica of a quiet, subservient woman of whom Mister would approve. However, we see Sofia's boisterous personality challenged and subdued by Miss Millie (The Mayor's wife). When asked to be Millie's maid, Sofia refuses. Consequently, she is beaten and imprisoned until she accepts her fate. Broken and alone, Sofia uncomfortably slots into a submissive role but is constantly comforted by Celie, Shug, Harpo and Squeak who quietly infuse her with life again. At the end of the piece, we see Sofia's spirit return to full strength which restores the love back into her marriage with Harpo.

What does this character represent:

Sofia represents strength, intelligence, and matriarchy in a patriarchal world. Consequently, this disrupts the status quo which a lot of the characters are used to, especially Mister. Her journey also highlights Race which is an important layer to the story. Although Sofia is scorned for being 'outspoken', she is still able to flex this side of her personality within the Black community. However, when taken out of a safe context (into a space of Whiteness) we see Sofia visibly beaten into submission and her voice silenced; echoing remnants of Slavery and the norms for racial segregation in America.

Provocations:

- Topic for discussion: What are some of the societal expectations that placed on women in the 21st century?

- What are some of the words that can be used to describe Sofia?
- What can we learn from the relationship between Sofia and the mayor's wife (how does society view them differently?)
- Suggest a style or genre of music or even dance that might suit/represent this character?

- gender roles in the early 20th century?
- Why do you think Shug opens up to Celie about her life experiences?
- Suggest a style or genre of music or even dance that might suit/represent this character?

Shug Avery



Main connections in the story:
Celie and Mister

Shug's storyline:

Shug is a charismatic yet complex singer in need of help. She is the love interest of Mister and comes crashing into Celie's life unexpectedly. It's clear she is the "one who got away" in Mister's love life, which creates a competitive environment between Shug and Celie. At first, Shug dislikes Celie, calling her "ugly" and refusing to talk with her. However, through Celie's constant displays of kindness, Shug gives in. The two develop a close connection which transforms from friendship into romantic love.

As the story develops, we realise Shug is the daughter of a local preacher but was rebuked for choosing the path of a Blues singer. Shug is also on her own quest to find happiness and acceptance outside of the male gaze. She also plays a major role in reuniting Celie with her sister, Nettie, which strengthens their bond tenfold.

What does this character represent:

Shug personifies freedom of art, love and expression. She is self-made and not dependant on men unlike most of the female characters within the piece. This adds to her attraction from Mister and inspires Celie to go on her own journey of self-discovery. She also embodies the ethos of the 1920's. She is flamboyant, unapologetic, and comfortable with her sexuality outside of societal expectations.

Provocations:

- Consider the reasons why Shug's father disowned her for becoming a Blues singer. How did her path contradict the expectations of Christianity and

Ol' Mister



Ol' Mister's storyline:

Unlike the other characters mentioned so far, Ol' Mister has a minor role within the musical but has huge impact. He is the father of Mister and his values are traditional; often stating what a woman should or should not do. He also displays elements of toxic masculinity and patriarchal values towards Mister and Harpo. It is revealed Ol' Mister's views on Shug Avery were the final straw in their initial relationship due to her more liberal lifestyle choices.

What does this character represent:

Ol' Mister represents the preservation of traditional Christian values and gender norms. He is rigid in his thinking and consequently beyond redemption because of an unwillingness to change. His presence is felt when the norms of the society have been challenged through the characters (for example when Mister brings home Shug despite the fact he already has a wife) or large family gatherings which are meant to represent good southern values.

Provocations:

At times, the values and opinions of Ol' Mister channel through Mister. This can make it difficult to hear his true thoughts/raw emotions.

Compare the values of Ol' Mister, Mister and Harpo to see the changes in opinion and values over the course of three generations

- What values have been passed down?
- What values have been challenged/replaced?

Church Ladies



Church ladies' storyline:

The church ladies are always on the periphery of the stage which allows them to see and comment on the story. In the beginning, we hear the thoughts of the church ladies offering pity/gossip about Celie's pregnancy.

What do they represent?

Through their wondrously melodic vocals (sung in a gospel style) they offer narration, social critique, guidance to the characters and humour to the overall piece. However, some might argue they symbolise a charismatic but non-confrontational style of Christianity. Whilst the church ladies knew of Celie's abuse, no one stood up for or protected her from Alphonso.

The Ensemble



Characters portrayed in the Ensemble:

The Preacher, the Field Hands, The Church Soloist, Adam, Olivia, Squeak and Grady, Ol' Mister and others in the community.

Ensemble's role in *The Color Purple*:

The ensemble brings the surrounding world of *The Color Purple* to life. By allowing the community to be channelled through actors who play multiple roles, it reinforces the notion *The Color Purple* is everyone's story, and everyone has a right to access its beauty.

For more about the role of the ensemble in musical theatre, please turn to our section on **The World of The Musical**.



THE WORLD OF THE MUSICAL

In this section, we introduce themes of the musical and story, and historical events and ideas which inform the world of the play.

The Director and Creative Team would research these topics to help shape, guide and understand the story, text, and characters.

You might like to choose three or four topics below to research in depth to aid your own understanding of *The Color Purple*.

We have also included more in-depth information about terminologies used in musical theatre such as the role of an ensemble and movement.

Please note: Our examples of articles and videos are not definitive sources – they are suggestions of starting points for research, and may help you find your own facts and opinions.



TERMINOLOGY

AAVE

African American Vernacular English is a form of dialect that can be heard across America but more particularly in the Southern parts of the states.

LGBTQ+

Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. An umbrella term used to refer to the community as a whole.

PATRIARCHY

A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it.

WHITE SUPREMACY

The belief or idea that White people are superior to other races and should rule society and dominate over them.

GENRE

A style or category of art, music, or literature.

ENSEMBLE

A group of musicians, actors, or dancers who perform together.

COLONIALISM

When a country takes over the governance of another land and exploits it culturally and economically.

TOXIC MASCULINITY

Refers to the idea that masculinity is equal to dominance, homophobia and aggression towards women and other men.

TROPE

A significant or recurring theme across many cultural mediums (books, film, comics, plays etc.), or a strong recurring theme within a specific cultural medium such as Musical Theatre.

DIASPORA

The dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland.

SOLILOQUY

Stream of thoughts or speech from one character. Can be said in private, often using the audience as their sounding board.

MONOLOGUE

An extended speech or stream of thoughts spoken by one character in the presence of another character or characters.

DUOLOGUE

A conversation or scene between two characters.

DIALOGUE

A scene containing three or more people who have speaking roles.

MUTED

Completely unable or unwilling to speak, or of a place, object, or activity that becomes silent.

OPPRESSED

Subject to harsh and authoritarian treatment.

WORLD OF THE SHOW

The world in which the characters exist for example *The Color Purple* is set in rural Georgia. This doesn't always reflect real life for example fantasy and sci-fi settings.

CONTEXT

The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.

COMMUNITY

The people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality.

COHESION

The act of two or more parties working together in unison and harmony.

DISSONANT

Lacking harmony.

TRIPLE THREAT

A person, especially a performer who is proficient in three important skills within their field such as singing, dancing and acting.

THE ROLE OF THE ENSEMBLE

Often, the role of an ensemble member is overlooked and ranked lower than other members of the cast. However, this could not be further away from the truth. Without this vital role the creation of the story's world would not be possible, leaving the show vacant of social, historical, and communal context.

Here's a look at some of their key functions and how *The Color Purple* team have used ensemble in the retelling of the story:

1) BRINGING THE WORLD TO LIFE

As mentioned, the ensemble is charged with task of creating the world of the show. Let's take a look at *The Color Purple*, for example. It is set in Georgia (in the Deep South of the U.S.A) which means the ensemble would have to incorporate social and historical context into their acting. This might be reflected in their costume and movement (for example a tired field hand might walk with a slower, staggered pace due to his hard work in hot temperatures).

They would also need to infuse a southern accent into their style of singing or rhythmical speaking. This would be aided by the style of music they're singing; for example, a slave spiritual song or gospel which would already have elements of AAVE, but it is the ensemble's job to maintain the illusion throughout the piece or else the world of the show is lost and the audience along with it.

2) MUSICAL STORYTELLING (CHORUS AND COMMUNITY)

A large responsibility of the ensemble is to narrate the story through song. This is especially important in *The Color Purple* because it gives a voice to characters (such as Celie) who have lost the power to speak due to abuse and oppression. An example of this can be seen when Celie and Nettie's letters are sung. The ensemble sings and acts alongside the characters to reinforce the meanings of the letters and to physically bring them to life.

It also builds a sense of community within the context of the play. Georgia was (and still is) home to a large African American population who value community and cohesion dearly. This is often seen in the play through family gatherings, working in the fields and in the church which was a staple part of their lives. The ensemble must retell the experiences of these communities through the vocals; exhibiting harmonies to signify peace and dissonant (disjointed) harmonies to signify danger and meltdown.

3) MOVEMENT

Finally, the ensemble is often known to possess the triple threat of theatre: singing, acting, and dancing. Movement is an essential part of being an ensemble as it regulates the tone and pace of the play. It also helps show similarities, differences, and origins in the story. For example, the dancing that is seen in the church scene might have the same pace of the dancers at Harpo's juke joint. The setting may be different, but the level of expression is similar. This is down to most African American genres deriving from Gospel music so the similarities will be strongly evident.

Moreover, movement can be an important when recounting Black stories on stage. Historically, the Black diaspora has been muted and oppressed by White systems of power. This led to Black voices and truths being silenced.



Map of Georgia 1930

OTHER TROPES IN MUSICAL THEATRE

A HAPPY ENDING

Joyous endings are an expected trope within musical theatre. Even though a character may go through challenging circumstances, there is a desire from the audience to see them triumph. This gives the audience a sense of catharsis – a release of relief, joy, and completion at the end of a story. It also makes the audience feel like justice has been restored. This can be seen in *The Color Purple* when we become invested in Celie and Nettie's reconciliation. If this objective had not been achieved, the audience would feel underwhelmed and the story unresolved.

MUSIC AND NARRATIVE

Another technique you may notice whilst watching *The Color Purple* is the music's ability to mimic the mood, tone, environment, and pace of the story. For example, in Harpo's Juke Joint, the musical score becomes more seductive to symbolise the freedom of the space and to foreshadow some of the romantic scenes that come in directly after.

The composers also use this technique to create a world of safety that outside forces wish to harm. This is demonstrated in the Olinka scene where the music and melody mirror an African utopia. However, the undertones slowly reveal the threat of colonialism and police brutality entering the world.

SOLOS – THE MUSICAL MONOLOGUE

Usually, the protagonists in a musical will have a solo number which is imperative to the piece. Solos are like monologues – they shine a spotlight on the characters inner thoughts and emotions which might not have been made public before. They can also signify a moment of deep reflection or moment of triumph, self-love, and acceptance.

In *The Color Purple*, both Celie and Mister have solo songs. There is a huge contrast in storyline for both characters which naturally influences the intentions behind the songs.

For example:

Extract: *I'm Here* (Celie's Solo)

*I believe I have everything inside of me
Everything I need to live a bountiful life
With all the love alive in me
I stand tall as the tallest tree
And I'm thankful for ev'ry day that I'm given
Both the easy and the hard ones I'm living
But most of all
I'm thankful I for
Loving who I really am
I'm beautiful
Yes, I'm beautiful
And I'm here*

This solo is an important milestone in Celie's journey. We see a character (who has been subject to abuse) find her voice, beauty and self-worth. This gives the audience a sense of catharsis and pride in watching Celie grow into her true self.



Photograph: Manuel Harlan

THEMES OF THE MUSICAL



Photograph: Manuel Harlan

Trigger warnings: This section touches on themes such as sexual abuse, physical assault and racial violence.

RACE AND OPPRESSION

Throughout the play, racism and oppression present themselves in many ways. Primarily, the audience sees female characters such as Celie and Nettie oppressed by male dominance, which usually takes place in the family home.

Right from the start of the musical, we see how Celie is abused and violated by the men around her, including the man she believes is her father, and her husband Mister, who treats her with malice. Nettie is banished from her family because she refuses Mister's advances. On a larger scale, the audience can see racial oppression, which affects all the characters. Interestingly, some of the play's oppressive characters such as the Mayor's wife are spoken about but never seen on stage with the Black characters in the story.

Another example of oppression is the contrast between Africa and the U.S.A. We see similar levels of dominance plaguing the peace and freedom of the Black characters on stage. Through Sofia's imprisonment and the destruction of Olinka (which happen at the same time, just in different countries) shows similarities in brutality toward Black spaces and people.

Discussion points:

- Why do you think the writer chose to keep some of the oppressive characters offstage?
- How can you show the threat of an oppressive power by use of levels and proxemics?
- Class debate: Has oppression in America become better or worse since the early 20th century?
- How do we view race relations in the UK?

Links:

- **Thinking About Race** with the **Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture:** <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race>
- **An introduction to racial tension in the 1920s USA**
- **Segregation explained by young people**



RELIGION AND FAITH

Christianity and the idea of faith are woven into the storyline. Celie's letters to God result in an honest, confidential view of her thoughts. As the play progresses, Celie's perspective on God changes. She begins to have a personal relationship with God, and realises God exists inside of people as well as in church.

Some of the topics explored in *The Color Purple* are intersectional, meaning they overlap and influence each other. This can be said about the idea of God and male dominance (patriarchy). At the beginning of the piece, Celie views God as an elderly White male who lives in the sky. However, through her relationship with Shug (and other Black females in her life), the face of her saviour changes. By the end of the piece, Celie finds solace in the notion God could be female and stretch beyond the church/religion. This shows the breakdown of male oppression in her life by her faith reflecting her love from female relationships.

Lastly, Celie believed hard work and duty were needed to please God. Societally, this is a hangover from Slavery. Slave masters used the idea of hell and eternal damnation as mental punishment for slaves. Shug challenges this by expressing how she worships God. Rather than hard labour, Shug uses admiration of nature, for example walking in fields of lavender and admiring the colour purple as paying respect to her Creator. Celie's perspective shifts, entering a more relaxed, loving relationship with God and with herself.

Discussion points:

- What is Celie's relationship with God and how does this develop over the musical?
- How do Celie's relationships with other people influence her faith?
- How did the slave trade impact religion for African Americans?
- How can we use staging to show the religion and faith of the piece?

Link:

- **Mahalia Jackson:**
One of America's first mainstream gospel artists



FEMINISM

The importance of female alliance is a prominent theme within the play. This can be seen within Celie and Nettie's heart-warming relationship at the beginning of the story, which creates a haven away from male dominance and racial oppression.

Celie is consistently degraded by male figures in the story. Her physical appearance is judged and her place within the household is firmly set by her husband, Mister. However, this is constantly challenged and picked apart by the presence of female characters in her life. The arrival of Shug immediately shatters the illusion that women can't aspire to greatness. Celie views Shug as an rare find in her world; a Black female who is admired rather than ridiculed. Her presence alone fills Celie with hope of what her femininity could grow into following the right guidance.

As the story introduces characters such as Shug Avery, Sofia, and Squeak, the audience see a strong network of Black women sticking together in companionship and love. No scene demonstrates this more than the Easter Dinner, where the story enters a battle of the sexes. The writers use a traditional family dinner which places men at the head of the table. During the meal, Celie, Sofia and Squeak find the strength to confront their male oppressors which disrupts the balance of power in the family. This is made possible by their feminist alliance which fuels one another to confidently speak their truth. It also enables Celie and Squeak to leave their environment in search of a new home, symbolising their new-found agency and control over their destiny.

Discussion points:

- In a group, discuss the different ways the writers bring the female characters together in solidarity
- There are moments in the musical when the female characters are not united. What are the main reasons for these occurrences?
- Examine each female character within the piece. How does their character develop from the start to the ending of the musical?
- How can you show the development of the character's personality through movement?

Links:

- A mini guide to feminism: <https://kids.kiddle.co/Feminism>
- **We Should All Be Feminists** Ted Talk by **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**



LGBTQ+

Celie suffers and is forced to endure life in the first part of the story, but when she meets Shug Avery, she discovers feelings of sexual love and companionship that she's never felt before. These feelings grow throughout the musical and it is through her romantic relationship with Shug that Celie discovers her true self.

Celie is empowered by Shug's love. Beforehand, Celie believed no one cared for her and that she was ugly/unworthy. When Shug sings *Too Beautiful For Words*, it is the first time Celie's loving nature receives compliment. She also discovers her sexual attraction for women, which ignites hope for healthy, romantic relationships.

In the world of the musical and in the natural world, being gay was illegal under the Sodomy Laws. Whilst lesbian relations were not punishable in the same way as gay men, it was still heavily frowned upon by society and the church. Lesbian safe spaces were regularly raided by law enforcement, viewing such spaces as immoral and ungodly. Closer to home, African American culture (which was heavily influenced by Christianity) was very critical of the LGBTQ+ in the early 20th century. This would have meant Celie and Shug would have faced a battle on multiple fronts for their love to be accepted publicly without scrutiny.

It is important to note, even though Celie and Shug's relationship didn't last, the effects of their love continue to empower Celie and give birth to her relationship with herself. At the end of the musical, Shug leaves her for the young musician Germaine. Celie transforms her feelings of abandonment into a statement of firm self-confidence and empowerment in the song 'I'm Here'.

Discussion points:

- How does the musical present lesbian love in comparison to heterosexual love and relationships?
- How does Celie's relationship with Shug change her sense of self, and why?
- *The Color Purple* is one of the most iconic LGBTQ+ stories of all time, especially for Black women. What other queer love stories can you think of that has impacted the LGBTQ+ community?
- Consider how religion and gender expectations would have hindered free movement for LGBTQ+ people in the early 20th century.

- How might lighting and stage aid in the storytelling of Queer stories?
- What are the dangers of portraying LGBTQ+ characters without proper research? (Think about stereotypes and how this can be portrayed in gestures)

Do some research to find out about other books, films, plays or musicals that are also important to the LGBTQ+ community.

Links:

- ***The Color Purple: A Sublime Portrayal Of Lesbianism Ahead Of Its Time:*** <https://www.dailyca.org/2020/02/25/the-color-purple-a-sublime-portrayal-of-lesbianism-ahead-of-its-time/>
- ***Remembering The Color Purple As A Queer Story:*** <https://www.themarysue.com/remembering-the-color-purple-as-a-queer-story/>

ECONOMICS

In the early 20th century, we begin to see the rise of African American businesses and their monetary contribution to the American economy. Entrepreneurship is sewn throughout the play with ventures such as Shug's successful music career, Celie's 'Folkspants Unlimited' and Harpo's juke joint.

Shug's music career – It's established Shug is a successful vocalist who's travelled widely due to her talent. American singers received harsh treatment from the White American music industry; often wanting to distinguish between Caucasian and "Race" music. This meant genres such as Blues, Jazz and Soul were stigmatised, and this made it harder to make money from music sales and performances.

Harpo's Juke Joint – Similar with Shug's music career, juke joints were a safe space for African American artists to perform to paying crowds. It also was an answer to the issue of prohibition which existed in America in the 1920s (for more on prohibition, head to Historical Context)

Research:

Research five Black American businesses that have helped contribute to modern society.

Some examples can include:

- Beats by Dre
- Tidal streaming service
- How can costume and stance help to convey economic status of the characters of the piece?
- How can staging help to show class and economic standing in the world of the show?

Link:

- ***The Rise Of Black Businesses In America***



GENDER NORMS

At the start of the piece, we are introduced to characters who adhere to traditional gender roles. Both Celie and Nettie are seemingly quiet and dutiful. They follow the social norm of being seen and not heard and are completely at the mercy of their male family members.

However, as the musical develops, we see early 20th century gender norms challenged. Whilst Celie is not officially head of the family, we can see a clear undermining of Mister's authority when Harpo makes decisions regarding Sofia based on the advice given by Celie. Wisdom (even though at this point it was extremely faulty) coming from a woman is a direct attack on gender norms as women were not seen to be educated or possess critical thinking skills in comparison to men.

In Harpo and Sofia's relationship, we see that Sofia is more suited to being in an "alpha" position; often speaking her mind and being unapologetically bold in her personality. Their relationship dynamic is a challenge to traditional male and female roles. In the 20th century western culture, gender norms were fixed and sometimes constricting. Men were expected to be dominant, and women were perceived as the weaker sex, often resulting in men being considered more important and superior.

Lastly, Shug and Celie's venture into entrepreneurship is another blow to traditional gender roles. This can be seen in Shug's music career which allows her to express her sexuality and femininity in a liberated way. She is not restricted in her musical content and uses her fashion sense to reinforce her desire for freedom. Celie also demonstrates this through opening Celie's Folkspants. This is another overt jab at gender norms as pants were more associated with men than women (until after World War One and Two). Celie making and wearing trousers is a metaphor for taking control of her own life outside the binary gender norms and expectations.

Discussion points:

- How do we view gender norms in 21st century Britain?
- Has this changed since the time *The Color Purple* was set?

Links:

- **Gender norms**
<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/how-gender-roles-affect-young-people>
- **Women's roles in the 1930's**

**FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

Traditional family structures are consistently questioned in *The Color Purple*. At the beginning and throughout the piece, the protagonists view marriage and children as a remedy to poverty and as a means for social elevation, protection, and overall happiness.

Interestingly, throughout the piece we are exposed to the idea of non-traditional family structures. The first instance can be seen with Celie and Nettie, who live with their stepfather Alphonso (Pa). Their mother has died, and they're subject to a turbulent upbringing by someone who does not have their best interests at heart.

This sentiment of non-traditional families carries on through into Celie's marriage, where she inherits stepchildren who have also lost their mother. Celie is forced into a maternal role which robs her of her childhood.

However, as the characters evolve and develop their core values, supportive friends or lovers become surrogate family. This can be seen in the relationships which Celie develops with Shug and Sofia. Throughout the story, we see Celie and Shug's relationship develop from platonic to romantic, which strengthens their bonds and replaces Celie's attachment to her husband.

Another factor we see in the musical is the idea of long-distance relationships. Celie and Nettie do not physically see each other throughout most of the play. However, the deep bond formed in childhood keeps their love for each other alive even without consistent communication.

The final scenes see Celie reunited with family members who were taken away from her and surrounded by new family members who have been adopted through love, friendship, and solidarity.

Discussion points:

- How have family structures changed over time?
- Class activity: monologue/poetry exercise – Write a short monologue or spoken word poem about what your family or best friends mean to you.
- What are some of the terms for familial structures in the 21st century?

Links:

- **American family structures**
<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>
- **British family structures**
<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/british-culture/british-culture-family>



HISTORICAL CONTEXT RELATING TO *THE COLOR PURPLE*



THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1960's America saw a surge of protests, boycotts and political statements from African Americans fighting for civil rights and an end to segregation laws. One of the figureheads for the movement was Martin Luther King Jr, a minister and activist from Atlanta, Georgia. His speech, "I Have A Dream" has become one of the most famous speeches of all time due to its call for equality and peace across the nation. At the same time, there were other leaders of the civil rights movement such as Malcolm X and James Baldwin who had different approaches to equality. Malcolm X believed in a more radical approach to racial equality and has often been perceived as more aggressive in politics.

However, without the balance of these leaders, the civil rights movement would have failed in creating an inclusive space for all Black Americans (regardless of class, skin tone and religion) to feel supported and protected. Walker, a vocal civil rights activist, was personally impacted by segregation and racism in her home country. This influenced her literature, both fictional and academic, and is reflected in her more defiant characters such as Sofia and in Celie's unyielding spirit.



THE COLOR PURPLE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA TIMELINE

1904: Celie begins first letter.

1910: Celie marries Albert (Mister).

1912: Nettie runs away.

1917: Harpo & Sofia marry.

1921: Shug comes to stay with Albert and Celie.

1926: Carter G. Woodson proposes **Negro History Week** (a pre-cursor to **Black History Month**, 1976).

1929: **Hallelujah!** The first film with an all black cast is released in America.

1931: **The Scottsboro' Boys** are arrested – a group of young black African-American boys are arrested accused of rape and assault.

1935: Nettie's first letter given to Celie.

1936: **Jesse Owens** wins four gold medals at the Summer Olympics in Berlin.

1939: World War II begins, African-Americans enlist.

1940: **Hattie McDaniel** is the first African-American to win an Academy Award.

1941: **The Color Purple** ends, but the story continues...

The Fair Employment Act is issued by **President Roosevelt**.

1942: **The Committee on Racial Equality** is founded.

1943: **The Detroit Race Riot**, which lasts for 3 days.

1944: **Alice Walker** is born.

1947: **Jackie Robinson** plays for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

1948: **President Harry Truman** desegregates the armed forces.

1950: Under court order, University of Virginia admits an African American student to its law school.

1954: Segregation in public schools is outlawed by the Supreme Court.

1955: The Supreme Court rules that desegregation must occur with 'all deliberate speed.' **Rosa Parks** refuses to give up her seat to a white passenger, leading to the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**.

1956: Singer **Nat King Cole** assaulted during a segregated performance.

1957: A report is published in the New York Times highlighting that in 3 years since the Supreme Court ruling 11 southern states have failed to desegregate.

1960: Four African-American students sit at a lunch counter in Greensboro and spark six months of the **Civil Rights Act of 1960** signed by **President Eisenhower**.

1961: Interstate buses display the following notice, 'Seating aboard this vehicle is without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin, by order of the Interstate Commerce Commission.'

1963: **Martin Luther King Jr.** delivers 'I have a dream' speech. Four young black Sunday school-girls killed in Birmingham church bombing.

1964: **The Civil Rights Act**, blocking discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion or native origin, is signed by **President Johnson**.

1965: **The Voting Rights Act** prohibits racial discrimination in voting.

1968: **Martin Luther King Jr.** is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. The first black female US Representative, **Shirley Chisholm**, is elected. She served from 1969 to 1983.

1969: **The Stonewall Riot** takes place in Greenwich Village, marking the beginning of the **Gay Liberation Movement**.

1982: **Alice Walker's The Color Purple** is published, winning the **Pulitzer Prize** the following year.

1985: **The Color Purple** is released as a film. Directed by **Steven Spielberg**, the film stars **Whoopi Goldberg** as Celie and **Oprah Winfrey** as Sofia.

1994: **President Clinton** signs the **Violence Against Women Act**, to give protection to victims of domestic abuse.

2002: For the first year, African-Americans, **Denzel Washington** and **Halle Berry**, win both the best actor and actress awards at the Oscars.

2005: The original production of **The Color Purple** the musical opens on Broadway.

2006: Civil rights activist **Tarana Burke** begins using the phrase 'Me Too' to empower victims of sexual harassment and assault.

2008: **Barack Obama** is elected President of the United States, the first African American to hold the post. He serves until 2016.

2012: 17 year old **Trayvon Martin** is shot by neighbourhood watch volunteer **George Zimmerman**. Zimmerman's acquittal sparks the **Black Lives Matter** movement.

2014: 18 year old **Michael Brown** is fatally shot by a Police Officer in Ferguson, Missouri, leading to protests across the country.

2016: American Footballer **Colin Kaepernick** begins to kneel during the national anthem at NFL games as a protest against police brutality and racism.

2017: White Nationalist protests take place in Charlottesville, Virginia, over plans to remove a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. **#MeToo** movement begins following accusations against Hollywood producer **Harvey Weinstein**.

2019: **Curve** and **Birmingham Hippodrome** open the production of **The Color Purple – The Musical**. The Times commented, 'as blazingly relevant as ever.'

2020: Major protests were sparked at the end of May following the death of **George Floyd**. The **Black Lives Matter** movement organises protests around the world. Former Police Officer **Derek Chauvin** was subsequently found guilty of murder and manslaughter.

2021: **Curve** and **Birmingham Hippodrome** stream the production of **The Color Purple The Musical – At Home**. Broadway World commented, 'Breath-taking and beautifully shot, The Colour Purple The Musical – At Home is a must-watch.' The **Black Lives Matter** movement was nominated for the **Nobel Peace Prize** noting that, 'awarding the peace prize to Black Lives Matter, as the strongest global force against racial injustice, will send a powerful message that peace is founded on equality, solidarity and human rights, and that all countries must respect those basic principles.'

Discussion points:

- James Baldwin was a civil rights activist who did an excellent job documenting the movement. His book *I Am Not Your Negro* comments on the civil rights movement and shows all sides of the activist spectrum. His writing was powerful and has educated generations after his death. Whilst he may not have been the loudest in the room, there is always space for deep thinkers, writers, and observers to shape a movement.

Research other key figures who paved the way:

Rosa Parks



Harriet Tubman



Sojourner Truth



Links:

- A Short History Of The Civil Rights Movement**



- Website about **Civil Rights Movement**: <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>

PROHIBITION

In a frantic attempt to stop its citizens from alcoholism, violence and scandal, the government placed a ban on all alcoholic beverages from 1920-1933. This meant all establishments that once sold alcohol were now prohibited to do so by law. As a result, underground juke joints and "speakeasies" became exceedingly popular, which were kept off the radar of law enforcement and government officials. Juke joints were also looked down on by the church, as they viewed them as sinful and disrespectful to the country's laws.

Juke Joints was predominantly run by African Americans in the southern states of America.

Their main activities included:

- Music
- Gambling
- Dancing
- Drinking (usually drinking moonshine – a bootleg, homemade alcoholic beverage)
- Performances by Black Artists

It is also interesting to note this period came directly after the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic that swept across the world. This brush with mortality led to people wanting to embrace enjoyment as much as possible. The 20's were known for parties, stylish fashion and the advancement of performing arts.

Research:

During restrictive laws, the "roaring" 20's become one of the most vibrant decades in history. As well as researching prohibition, you may want to look at:

- Fashion of the era
- Films
- Music

Do you see any similarities between 1920's and the modern age?

- Do you think the 2019/2020 pandemic might have a similar effect on society's view on enjoyment?
- Create a scene based on prohibition and morph it into the scene from Harpo's juke joint to show how the historical context has directly affected the world of the musical.

Link:

- US Prohibition Era**



THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Often referred to as “The Depression”, this period saw a colossal economic downturn in America and across the globe. Following the Wall Street crash of 1929, the country saw the value of money plummet at a rapid speed, causing families to descend into poverty, hunger, and a never-ending cycle of unemployment.

Life for African Americans became harder as communities plummeted into poverty. They were three times more likely to suffer unemployment compared to their Caucasian counterparts and by 1932, nearly half of African Americans were unemployed. In a desperate attempt to keep their communities alive, the hand of friendship and family support systems became imperative. Black people were largely excluded from White charity initiatives such as soup kitchens, which meant hunger and malnourishment was rife across the country.

Discussion point:

Consider how the depression affected those who were marginalised in American society such as ethnic minorities, working class and other communities outside of government support.

Link:

- **The Great Depression**
<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Great-Depression/353208>

BLACK SUFFRAGE

After the American Civil War in 1870, all men, regardless of race, were given the right to vote, but women’s political voices were still being silenced and denied. On 18th August 1920, White women across America were given the right to vote, however, this did not extend to African American women and other ethnic minorities in the country. It was not until nearly fifty years later that Black women could finally vote in the U.S.

The contributions of African American suffragists were largely ignored by leading pioneers of the movement. There’s a lot of nuances in the compartmentalisation of the suffragists. Whilst a layer of oppression fell upon women generally, White women were still oppressing Black women based on skin colour and social ranking, causing fractures in the overall goal of equal rights.

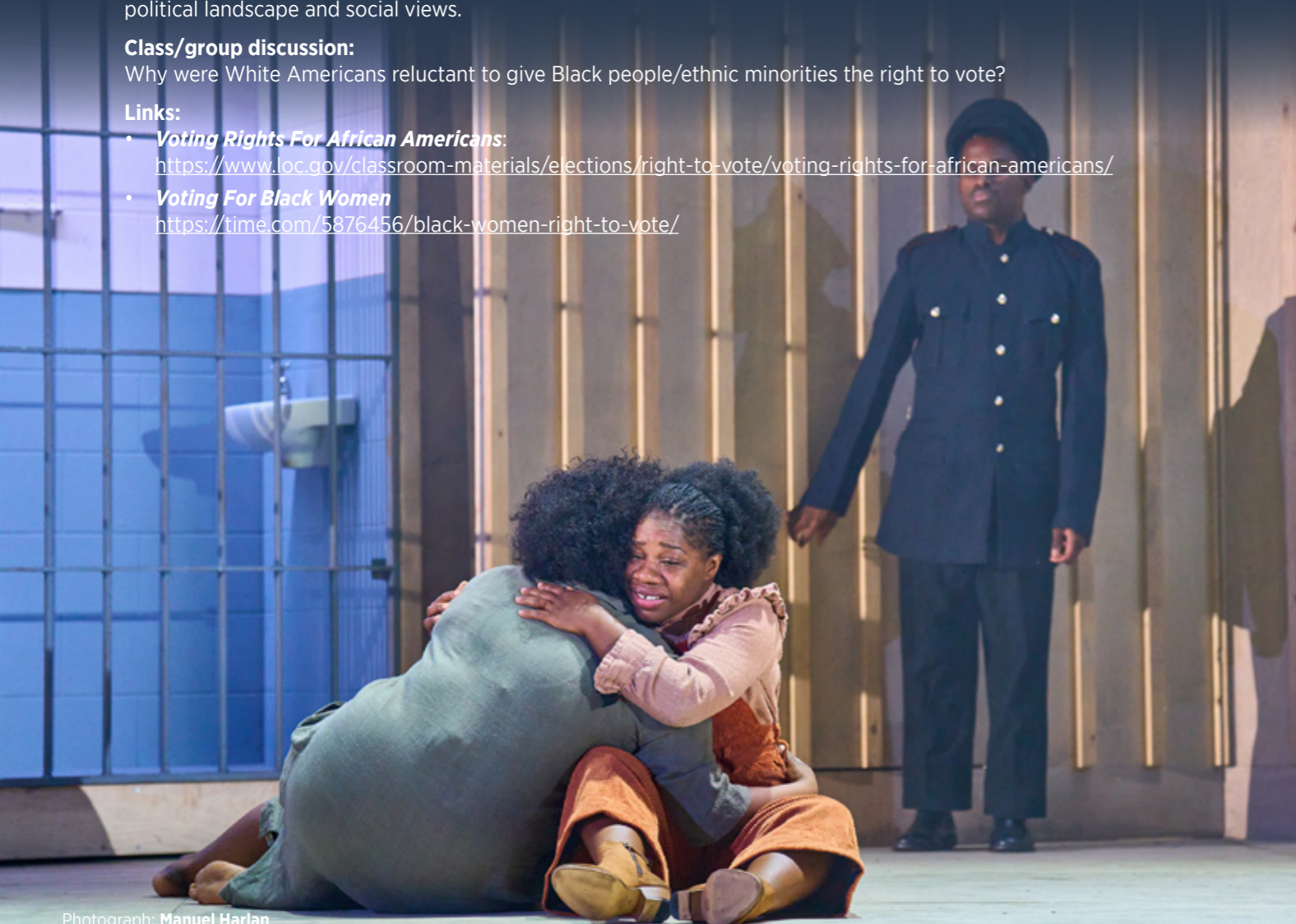
The Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr was a huge catalyst in helping Black women gain the vote. The Voting Rights Act (1965) ensured all African Americans were able to exercise their vote, changing their political landscape and social views.

Class/group discussion:

Why were White Americans reluctant to give Black people/ethnic minorities the right to vote?

Links:

- **Voting Rights For African Americans:**
<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/elections/right-to-vote/voting-rights-for-african-americans/>
- **Voting For Black Women**
<https://time.com/5876456/black-women-right-to-vote/>



Photograph: Manuel Harlan

COMMUNITY COLLECTIVES

The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) is an organisation created by some of the best African American scholars, thinkers, and activists of the era. Their collective aim was to advocate for justice on behalf of Black people and fight for their advancement in American society. 112 years later, the NAACP is still a flourishing organisation continuing to support Black Americans against modern day racism.

Other initiatives descended from the NAACP, including The Black Panther Party. For many Americans, including many Black people, The Black Panthers were radical activists who wanted peace for Black communities – by any means necessary. Whilst a lot of Black Panther rallies became violent, their contributions to community services are undervalued. They set up community barber shops, food banks, breakfast for young children and handed out clothes to the poor. Initiatives like these were vital in deprived areas where government funding fell short.

Discussion point:

- How did initiatives such as NAACP influence modern day racial activism groups like Black Lives Matter?
- Game: The money is ours

This activity is played in the same fashion as Grandmother’s Footsteps. There is a bag of money at the end of the room and the “community” need it to repair a community hall. As a class, they must move toward the bag of money but if the ‘keeper’ turns around, everyone must freeze. If one person moves, everyone will need to return to their hall without the cash. The aim is to get the bag of money back to the community hall. This game teaches classes about the importance of community cohesion and how working together can help build bonds if they’re all focussed on the same goal.

Links:

- **NAACP** website
<https://naacp.org/>
- **How the NAACP fights racial discrimination**



RISE IN BLACK ARTISTS & SPORTSMANSHIP

The early 20th century saw the elevation of Black musicians, artists and sports personnel. One sportsman Jesse Owens – an African American track and field athlete – rose to international fame after his gold medal win at the 1936 Berlin Olympic games. His performance overshadowed German athletes which left Adolf Hitler, leader of Nazi Germany, embarrassed on an international scale. After his death, President Jimmy Carter said, “Perhaps no athlete better symbolized the human struggle against tyranny, poverty and racial bigotry”.

The era also saw the rise of artistic excellence within predominately Black areas of America. The Harlem renaissance turned a small area of New York into a “cultural mecca” of art of all disciplines. The period lasted from 1910 – mid 1930’s and included some of the greatest Black artists of the last century including Aaron Douglas, Lois Mailou Jones, Augusta Savage and Charles Alston.

Discussion point:

- Although Jesse won gold for America, he was refused an audience with the President because of his race. How does Jesse Owen’s experience compare to other Black athletes both here in the UK and in the USA?
- Then vs now

Links:

- **Jesse Owens Facts!**



- **Olympic Page Memorial**
<https://www.olympic.org/jesse-owens>
- **Harlem Renaissance**
<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance>

RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY CULTURE



Photograph: Manuel Harlan

BLACK LIVES MATTER

Born out of a hashtag, Black Lives Matter or BLM has become a social justice movement against racial inequality and police brutality in the U.S. The movement emerged after the death of Trayvon Martin in 2013 – causing its founders to organise protests against corrupt law enforcement. BLM saw a global expansion following the death of George Floyd in 2020, when millions of protestors of all ages stood up in defiance to atrocities faced by Black people worldwide.

Its roots stem from centuries of oppression, including the slave trade, segregation laws and racial injustices of the early 20th century – directly in the backdrop of Alice Walker's childhood.

Between 2015 and 2020, the British branch of BLM rose to prominence. Their organisers created protests across the UK in solidarity with their American cousins and in protest against the racial inequalities faced here in Britain. Interestingly, some of the organisers from Birmingham and the Midlands region were only 18-20 years old, showing the power of youth activism and political thinking in the UK.

The effects of BLM's protests have divided opinions across the globe. Whilst some people find them to be radical thinkers who drive positive change for Black people, not everyone agrees. Like with their predecessors (NAACP, Black Panthers etc), some authority figures find BLM's values challenging and believe the movement creates more division rather than community cohesion.

As a result, there are frequent debates, protests and clashes between both parties who struggle to reach a conclusion on equality, social justice and racial oppression.

Discussion point:

- What does it mean to make or experience a production of *The Color Purple* at a time when the Black Lives Matter movement is so prominent?

Links:

- Website: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>
- **Black British Feeling** video from BBC *Newsbeat*



AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION TO MUSIC

Music has been at the heart of the African American population for generations, especially before the Slave trade. It serves as a powerful way to convey stories and historical events to wider audiences and is also very therapeutic.

Historically, African Americans preserved their experiences of Slavery and their new religion of Christianity into songs called slave spirituals. Songs such as these were sung during laborious days in the fields. The lyrics and communal singing offered an uplifting sense of unity in times of adversity.

Throughout the musical, the audience is presented with genres such as Blues (which is an ancestor to modern day R&B music) and is also supported by the soulful sound of Gospel music.

Throughout the past century, African American music has evolved with genres such as:

- Hip-hop
- Rock
- Jazz
- Soul
- House

Each genre utters the plight, liberation and empowerment of Black people across the diaspora.

Similarly, in the UK, some of the most popular genres are born out of navigating social issues such as poverty, housing, racism and need to find a British Identity. Genres such as Jungle, Garage, Grime, Drill and UK Rap touch on the realities of being Black British but also celebrate joy, romance and a shared love of music.

Discussion points

- Has Black British music strived to achieve the same aims as African American music in relation to discussing inequality, race, and social progression and, if so, how?
- Are there any genres missing from the list of Black Genres? (Note for teachers: this could lead to an interesting conversation around appropriation of Black culture especially in relation to Rock and Jazz)
- Is there a song that you listen to that would speak to both past and present day?

For example, Sam Cooke's *A Change Is Gonna Come* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEBlaMOMkV4>

CAST AND CREW

We asked some of the creative team about their roles on the production, their concepts for the show, how they got into theatre and why they think *The Color Purple* is an important story to share.

INTERVIEW WITH RICARDO PARDO – ASSOCIATE DESIGNER

Who are you and what's your role within the show?

I am the associate designer which means I help bring existing productions back to life. In the case of *The Color Purple*, I will be helping the spirit of the story stay alive whilst the show is touring. This will be done through the costumes, props and the set. If any modifications need to be done, it needs to be amended in the same spirit of the show. There are many ways that we do this – one of them is by learning the history of the era and making sure each piece represents the time the play's set in.

In many ways, we're at the beginning of the journey! I've just got everything ready for the rehearsal period so now its time to take the show to its first home – Birmingham Hippodrome.

What was needed to bring the world of *The Color Purple* to life?

To keep the soul of the original production alive, you have to do a lot of research to work out why things are meant to be in the story. I consulted with the original designers to make sure their vision and interpretation of the text stays alive which is reflected in the set and the costumes.

In the world of the musical, the story kicks off in the early 20th century and spans over three/four decades. The story follows Celie who is born in the Deep South of America (rural Georgia). This was very much at the start of the fight for equal rights for Black people in America and for women to gain equality with men. Once I had this clear in my mind, it was important that the designs didn't steer away from these histories that enrich the story.

We also looked at the architecture from the period which had a lot of vertical panels and simplistic aesthetics. This really reflects the time and the communities that existed in Georgia at the time, especially in Black areas. There was also a lot of farmlands which would have surrounded houses, juke joints and churches.

It's important to keep the world of the musical true to its roots. If the set doesn't reflect the era of the story, it can cause the audience to disconnect and lose focus. We want them to feel immersed in the story. Transported into a different time and sitting at the feet of the characters listening to their lives. The set is the vehicle that takes them on their journey, so research is extremely important.

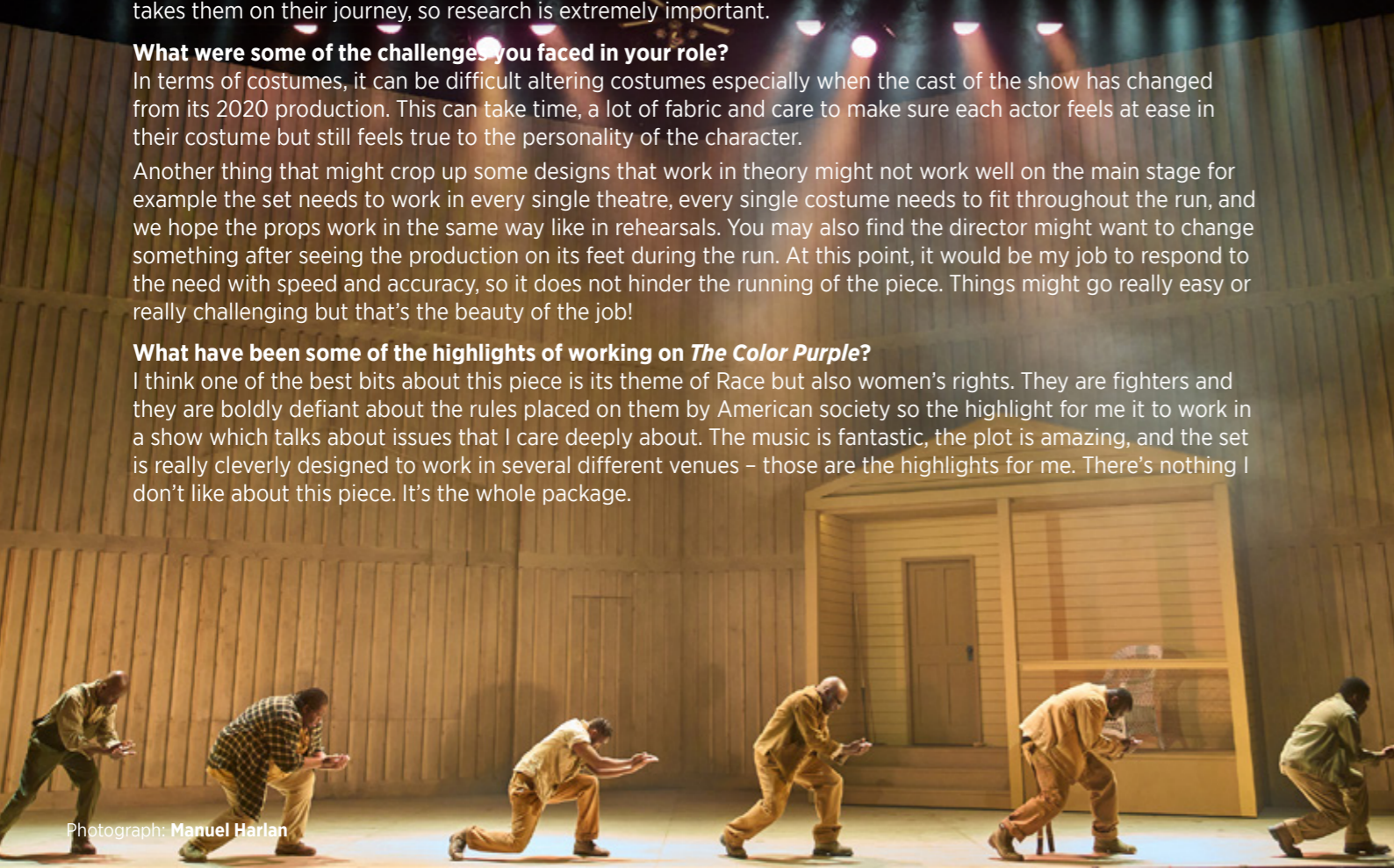
What were some of the challenges you faced in your role?

In terms of costumes, it can be difficult altering costumes especially when the cast of the show has changed from its 2020 production. This can take time, a lot of fabric and care to make sure each actor feels at ease in their costume but still feels true to the personality of the character.

Another thing that might crop up some designs that work in theory might not work well on the main stage for example the set needs to work in every single theatre, every single costume needs to fit throughout the run, and we hope the props work in the same way like in rehearsals. You may also find the director might want to change something after seeing the production on its feet during the run. At this point, it would be my job to respond to the need with speed and accuracy, so it does not hinder the running of the piece. Things might go really easy or really challenging but that's the beauty of the job!

What have been some of the highlights of working on *The Color Purple*?

I think one of the best bits about this piece is its theme of Race but also women's rights. They are fighters and they are boldly defiant about the rules placed on them by American society so the highlight for me it to work in a show which talks about issues that I care deeply about. The music is fantastic, the plot is amazing, and the set is really cleverly designed to work in several different venues – those are the highlights for me. There's nothing I don't like about this piece. It's the whole package.



Photograph: Manuel Harlan

THE VISION BOARD

Here's some of the images that inspired the set, props and costumes of *The Color Purple*! The 20's, 30's and 40s was a juxtaposing time in history. Whilst there was a booming music scene of blues and jazz taking over the country, there was also large pockets of the nation which still lived in a simplistic, humble way, relying on agriculture and community cohesion to get by.

Here's an exclusive look at the research used by the design team to help bring *The Color Purple* to life.



INTERVIEWS WITH CAST AND CREW



Photograph: Manuel Harlan



ME'SHA BRYAN CELIE

Me'sha's theatre credits include:

Romantics Anonymous (Bristol Old Vic); *As You Like It* (Regent's Park Open Air Theatre); *Caroline, or Change* (Playhouse Theatre, Hampstead Theatre); *Desire Under the Elms* (Sheffield Crucible

Theatre); *Sister Act* (The National Concert Hall, Dublin); *The Lion King* (UK tour) and *Been So Long* (The Young Vic).

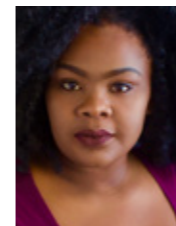
Television credits include:

Doctors and *Shakespeare & Hathaway: Private Investigators* (BBC). Me'sha's most recent film credits include *The Witches* (Warner Bros).

Me'sha on becoming Celie



Me'sha's top tips about the acting industry



ANELISA LAMOLA SOFIA and CHURCH SOLOIST

Training:

London College of Music and Mountview Academy of Musical Theatre.

Stage credits:

Vocalist - Johannes Radebe *Freedom/Strictly Come Dancing* (Peacock Theatre/UK tour); Addaperle in *The Wiz* (Hope Mill Theatre); Heather in *Sunset Boulevard* (Alexandra Palace Theatre); Church Soloist in *The Color Purple at Home* (online streaming Curve Leicester); Genie in *Aladdin* (Theatre Severn); alternate Erynn, Arethia and cover Narrator and Foreman in *Some Like It Hip Hop* (UK tour/Peacock Theatre); Church Soloist/cover Sofia in *The Color Purple* (Curve Theatre Leicester/ Birmingham Hippodrome Theatre) and Rafiki in *The Lion King* (Disneyland Paris).

Television and film:

Solo performance at BBC Radio 1 *Weekend Live 2022* (BBC 1/BBC Sounds); *Some Like It Hip Hop* for *Blue Peter* (CBBC/BBC); *Children in Need* - Adrian Lester and The Beatbox Collective (BBC); solo performance of the South African national anthem for the Rugby World Cup 2018 in Japan (ITV Worldwide); solo performance at BBC Radio 1 *Ibiza Live 2016* (BBC One); Chase & Status on *Later With Jools Holland* (BBC Two) and *Comic Relief* (BBC).

Animation:

Mrs. Weaver in *Hey Duggee* (BBC Worldwide) and Roly's Mum in *Hey Duggee* (BBC Worldwide).

Recording credits:

King Kong by Icarus released in 2017, peaking at number one on the UK Dance Charts. The track was also featured on season five of *Love Island* (ITV); *Come Together* by Franky Wah released in 2020, also peaking at number one on the UK Dance Charts. The track was featured on the *2020 BRIT Awards*; *Party* by MistaJam and Anelisa Lamola; *Ready to Dance* by Martin Ikin and Biscuits featuring Anelisa Lamola; *Can't Stop Now* by MistaJam and Anelisa Lamola, peaked at number one on the UK Dance Charts; *U Try Livin* by Red Hot Free, charity record for AIDS benefit, and many more all the major music platforms.

Anelisa on becoming Sofia



Anelisa's top tips about the acting industry



AKO MITCHELL MISTER

Theatre includes:

The Arbitrator in *Chess* (Theatre Royal Drury Lane); Preacher in *Bonnie & Clyde* (Arts Theatre, West End); Larry in *Indecent Proposal* (Southwark Playhouse); Bob Barker in Bernstein's *Wonderful Town*

(Opera Holland Park); Raymond in *Far From Heaven* (MTFest 2021); Europa Projekt Season: *Europeana* and *Peer Gynt* (RSC); Mister in *The Color Purple* (Leicester Curve and Birmingham Hippodrome); Bus/Dryer in *Caroline, or Change* (Chichester, Hampstead and West End); Nicely-Nicely in *Guys and Dolls* (Manchester Royal Exchange); Eddie in *The Wild Party* (The Other Place Theatre); Coalhouse in *Ragtime* (Charing Cross Theatre); (Park Theatre); *Grey Gardens* (Southwark Playhouse); *Misanthropes* (Old Vic New Voices); *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (Royal Festival Hall); Orin the Dentist in *Little Shop of Horrors* (Manchester Royal Exchange); Klook in *Klook's Last Stand* (Park Theatre); Gabriel in August Wilson's *Fences* (Duchess Theatre); *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* (Donmar Warehouse); Sweaty Eddie in *Sister Act* (London Palladium); Mufasa in *The Lion King* (Lyceum Theatre); *Doctor Dolittle* (UK tour); *The Mystery Plays* (Bath Music Festival) and *Broadway in the Shadows* (Luxembourg National Theatre and Arcola).

Television credits include:

The Grinch That Stole Christmas (NBC); *Hilda* (Netflix); *Game Face* (Channel 4); *Avenue 5* (HBO), *Best & Bester* (Nick); *Silent Witness* (BBC) and *Berlin Station* (EPIX).

Film includes:

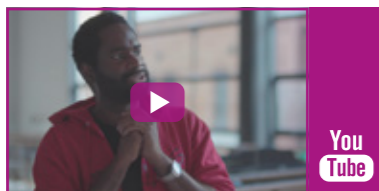
Doctor Strange in the *Multiverse of Madness* (Marvel); *Lion Versus the Little People*, *Lake Placid: The Final Chapter* (Syfy - UFO Films); *Johnny English Strikes Again* (Universal);

Cyberpunk 2077 (video game); *Horizon Zero Dawn* (video game). Ako directed and co-wrote the short *I'm In The Corner With The Bluebells* which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and won Best Director at the Mica Film Festival in Brazil. Ako also wrote and directed the short *I Promise* – winner of the Cineuropa Shorts/Filminute Audience Award.

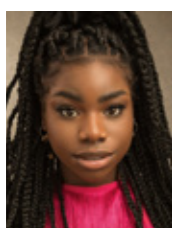
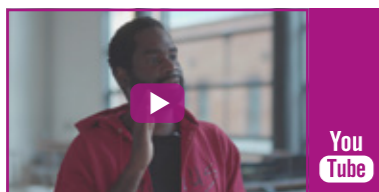
Radio includes:

BBC Radio 4 Drama – *Mueller: Trump Tower Moscow*. Ako narrates the series *Strangest Weather* on Earth (Discovery/Weather Channel USA) and the audiobooks: *Look Both Ways* (Harper Collins); *Hellcats 2* (Audible); *The Voice From the Ground* (Audible); *Take Your Breath Away* (HarperCollins); *The Precipice* (Penguin); *White Freedom* (Princeton University Press); *Wild Thing: Jimi Hendrix Story* (Penguin); *Optimism Over Despair* (Penguin); *Occupy* (Penguin); *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Penguin); *Judges: Volume II* (Rebellion) and the Alex Cross novels: *Along Came a Spider*, *Kiss the Girls*, *Jack and Jill*, *I*, *Alex Cross Country* and *Alex Trial*.

Ako on becoming Mister



Ako's top tips about the acting industry



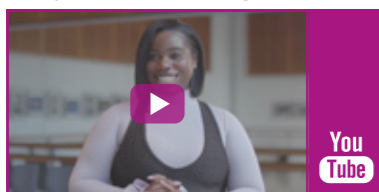
**AALIYAH ZHANE
NETTIE**

Aaliyah's theatre credits include:
The Comedy of Errors (Mercury Theatre).

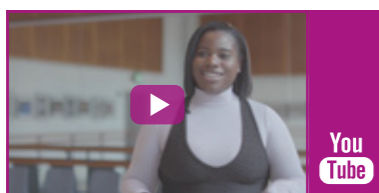
Previous credits whilst training at Rose Bruford include:

Victoria's Knickers, directed by Annie Fitzmaurice, *All About My Mother* by Edward Lewis and *Battle for the Soul* by Rachel Rooney.

Aaliyah on becoming Nettie



Aaliyah's top tips about the acting industry



**BREE SMITH
SHUG AVERY and DANCE CAPTAIN**

Training:

Arts Educational Schools London.

Stage credits:

Marmie in *Coming to England* (Birmingham Rep); Aunt Em/Glinda in *The Wiz* (Hope Mill Theatre); Flower in *Tomorrow May Be My Last* (Union Theatre); Ensemble in *Evita* (Regent's Park Open Air Theatre); Grandma in *Dick Whittington* (Theatre Royal Stratford East); Rosalia/first cover Anita in *West Side Story* (Royal Exchange Theatre); African Villager in *The Book of Mormon* (Prince of Wales Theatre); Henrietta in *Scrooge the Musical* (Leicester Curve Theatre); Ensemble in *Wonderland* (UK tour) and Ensemble for The Olivier Awards.

Other credits:

Assistant Director/Movement Director on *Kinky Boots* concert (Theatre Royal Drury Lane); Tinker Bell in *Tinker Bell the Musical* workshop (Bridewell Theatre); dancer for *ITV National Television Awards 2020*; *Eugenius!* workshop (London Palladium) and *Friday Night Is Music Night* (BBC Radio 2)

Bree on becoming Shug



Bree's top tips about the acting industry



**IAN OAKLEY
MUSICAL DIRECTOR**

Theatre credits include:

To the Streets (Birmingham 2022 Festival); *Playboy of the West Indies* and *Coming to England* (Birmingham Rep); *The Lion King* (UK and Ireland tour); *Spring Awakening* and *Mandela* (workshops); *From Here* (Chiswick Playhouse); *Turn Up London* (Cadogan Hall); *Forever Plaid* (Upstairs at the Gatehouse) and *Respect: the Aretha Franklin Songbook* (tour).

Television and film credits include:

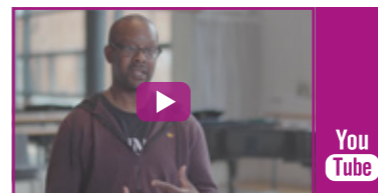
The Christmas Masterpiece (Tim Miner); *A Dose of Happiness* (Aleksander Aleksiev); *The Preacher's Kid* (Stan Foster); *The X Factor* (UK) – Stormzy, *Blinded by Your Grace Pt. 2* (Julia Knowles/ITV); *Victory* with Morris Cerullo (Ruth Kinser) and *Turning Point* with David Jeremiah (Troy Dausend).



Ian on his work on *The Color Purple*



Ian's top tips about the music industry



**MARK SMITH
CHOREOGRAPHER**

Mark studied at the Royal Ballet School and Bridget Espinosa's London Studio Centre and is the Founder and Artistic Director of Deaf Men Dancing.

Theatre credits include:

Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Leeds Playhouse and HOME, Manchester); *The Color Purple* (Curve and Birmingham Hippodrome); *The Last Five Years* (Wales Millennium Centre); *The Ruff Tuff Cream Puff Agency* (Belgrade Theatre); *Iolanthe* (Wilton's Music Hall and UK tour); *The Threepenny Opera* (UK tour); *The Rhythmics* (Southwark Playhouse); *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Longborough Festival); *As You Like It* (Oxford Shakespeare Company); *Die Fledermaus* (Den Norske Opera and Ballet); *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, *Noah*, *The Meeting*, *A Marvellous Year for Plums* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Chichester Festival Theatre); *Duckie* (Southbank Centre, Battersea Arts Centre, HOME Manchester); *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (National Youth Music Theatre); *Reasons to be Cheerful* (Graeae Theatre Company); *The Who's Tommy* (Ramps on the Moon UK tour) and *Aladdin* (Lyric Hammersmith).

Television and film credits include:

My Silent World (commissioned by BalletBoyz, Random Acts, Channel 4); *The Paralympic Homecoming* (DMD+, Channel 4) and *Paralympic Opening Ceremony* (London 2012).

Other credits include:

D-Sign Dance (Birmingham 2022 Festival, Arts Outburst and Black Country Dance Hub); *Shoes* (Sadler's Wells); *Hear! Hear! Let Us Tell You a Story*, *Time*, *Corazón a Corazón*, *Ten*, *Embrace* and *Alive* (Deaf Men Dancing); National English Ballet Theatre (choreography Lab) and *Blood Wedding* (Dundee Rep Ensemble).



Mark on choreographing *The Color Purple*



Mark's top tips about the dancing industry



**LAKESHA ARIE ANGELO
REVIVAL DIRECTOR**

Lakesha is a director, playwright, dramaturg and Associate Director of Soho Theatre.

Training:

Royal Holloway, MA Playwriting; Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, PGCE Drama; London South Bank University, BA Theatre Practice: Creative Production.

Theatre credits include:

Directing includes: *Trouble in Mind* (National Theatre); *Life of the Party* (Pleasance Theatre, Soho Theatre); *Shuck 'n' Jive* (Soho Theatre); *soft animals* (Soho Theatre); *Summer Fest* (Bunker Theatre); *The Hoes* (Hampstead Theatre); *Alive Day* (Bunker Theatre); *AS:NT* (Theatre503 – as part of Rapid Write Response) and *Prodigal* (Bush Theatre – for 'Artistic Directors of the Future Black Lives: Black Words').

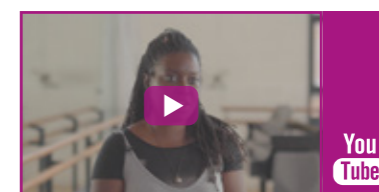
As Assistant Director at Soho includes:

The One, *Touch*, *Blueberry Toast* and *Roller Diner* (2017 West End Wilma Award for Best Comedy) and as Resident Assistant Director at the Finborough: *P'yongyang*, *Treasure*.

Playwright credits include:

The Ancestors (National Youth Theatre) and *Graveyard Gang* (Richmix, Poplar Union and community tour).

Lakesha on directing *The Color Purple*



Lakesha's top tips about the acting industry



EXERCISES AND IDEAS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS



Photograph: Manuel Harlan

SET DESIGN

Imagine you are designing a set for a production of the musical. In groups discuss and explore the following. You can talk through, write down, draw or sketch your ideas.

Activity one: Creating a design concept.

- Think about the themes of the musical. Consider which are the most important themes to you and consider how these might affect the visual style of your production of the musical including space, set, lighting and costumes.
- Make a list of locations in the story. How will you represent these locations?
- The musical takes place over a long period of time. Consider how you might show how time passes in your design for the musical.
- Think about how realistic your design is going to be. Will locations, objects and settings be represented literally or conceptually, and how will this affect the audience's understanding of the story and response to the themes?
- Create a visual mood-board for your design, including photos, drawings, colours and textures you will use as part of your design. The mood board could be physical, on paper, or on Pinterest.

Advanced activity: Making a model box.

For a professional show, a Designer would think through all the aspects above and create a "white card model" – a 1:25 scaled model of their design (e.g. 25 times smaller than the real-life design) made of white cardboard (without colour).

The Designer would then discuss this model with the Director and other members of the creative team to make sure they were happy with the initial design. The Designer would also discuss the white card model with the producers of the show, to make sure the set could be built within the budget.

Following these conversations, the Designer would adapt and develop their design and finally create a full colour scale model, which the set builders actually use and refer to when building the set. Try creating a 3D model box, or elements of your design, out of cardboard.

This can be very intricate, so don't worry too much about the scale if it's your first attempt!

Activity two: Offstage Presence – Onstage Impact

During the play, reference is made to racial oppression and its impact on the characters. However, the physical presence of these characters is not seen by the audience.

- How would you design the set to reflect danger approaching the Olinka tribe's village and Sofia's prison cell?
- Think about multimedia elements such as images, video clips, lighting and shadows that could represent the atmospheric presence of danger.
- You may want to consider the themes in the story and how they may influence the visual aspect of the production.

COSTUME DESIGN

A Costume Designer would consider:

- Will the costumes be realistic and of a specific period, or symbolic, or a mixture?
- How will costumes help to tell the story?
- Will each character have one costume or more than one?
- How do costumes illustrate characters' tastes, personality, status, wealth and preferences?

Activity one

Think about whether the costumes for your production are going to be from the period the story is set, or more universal, timeless or modern. In the Curve production of *The Color Purple – At Home*, for example, the characters' costumes are of the period but with modern twists, like their boots.

- If your costumes are going to be from the period, research the period/s the story is set. How did fashion change over this period and think about whether characters would have worn up-to-date fashion or not?
- If your costumes are not of the period, think clearly about why? Consider how contemporary designs will stay true to the story.
- Choose a character and draw a costume design(s) for them or find imagery which represents their style.

Activity two

Miss Celie's Folks Pants Unlimited Clothing can be a statement of a political stance, idea or your personality. Celie's entrepreneurial venture into creating trousers is a symbolic display of the female characters in *The Color Purple* finally becoming in charge of their own destiny. Trousers were traditionally associated with men, and it was therefore socially unacceptable for women to wear trousers for fear of breaking gender norms.

Task:

Imagine Celie's store was to open in the 21st century.

- What item or piece of clothing that symbolises power would be created and designed in Celie's shop?
- How might Celie design these items (think about colours, patterns, prints, images, messages, text) to express ideas of protest, freedom, equality, empowerment, love etc).

WRITING

Activity One:

The Color Purple musical is an adaptation from Alice Walker's epistolary novel (a book containing a series of letters). Letter writing and praying are therapeutic ways for Celie to order her thoughts or understand her feelings. However, some of Celie's family members such as Mister, Harpo, Sofia and Shug seldom use writing to understand themselves, communicate with each other or overcome their problems.

Choose one of the character scenarios below and write a letter on their behalf:

- Sofia in prison. Write a letter exploring Sofia's feelings about being away from her family.
- Mister writing to his father about his resentment towards him.
- Harpo writing to Mister about their relationship.
- Mister writing to Shug about his feelings about her.
- Nettie writing a letter to Mister about his damaging effect on her relationship with Celie.

Discussion points:

- The intentions behind the letter.
- How might the recipient respond?

Activity Two:

Letter writing is one of the oldest and trustworthy forms of documenting. However, in modern times, our forms of communication have become varied including audio, visual, kinaesthetic as well as written mediums.

If *The Color Purple* was set today, Celie and Nettie would have access to:

- Whatsapp (text and voicenotes)
- Written platforms/mediums such as Twitter, Facebook, texting and emails
- Visual platforms such as TikTok, Youtube and Instagram

Re-write/adapt some of Celie and Nettie's conversations with each other in the style of one of the mediums above. For example, a conversation over voice notes or Nettie texting Celie about Africa.

Example scenes could be:

- Celie's first letter to Nettie once she'd left Mister's place
- Nettie's letters to Celie from the village of Olinka
- Celie confiding in Nettie about her feelings for Shug
- Nettie writing to Celie about her children Adam and Olivia.

Don't forget – each platform will have its own style and tone (for example a YouTube channel might be more intimate, and a text might include more informal language, which might mimic the style of AAVE used in the musical.

Activity Three:

Imagine Sofia and Harpo's wedding day. Write a short scene that depicts the events of the ceremony.

Don't forget to think about:

- Who would be in attendance (e.g Mister, Ol' Mister, Celie, Sofia's family etc)
- Who would be happy or sour about their union? (this could lead to moments of humour as Mister might want to object but Sofia's family might be too intimidating to combat.
- How does the gender role reversal show up in the vows?

This activity can also double up as an acting task which can allow students to experiment with:

- Speech (AAVE)
- Gestures
- Embodying characters and their personality traits/quirks



ACTING

Soliloquies and Direct Address

In the musical, some of Celie's letters/prayers are delivered as soliloquies, a dramatic device where one character speaks aloud to themselves (observed by the audience) revealing their inner thoughts. This differs to a monologue, where a character speaks to another character.

Activity one

Think about moments in the production where Celie speaks directly to the audience as if we are in her personal world.

- Why do you think these moments of direct address were chosen
- How do these moments make the audience feel?

Activity two

Choose one of Celie's songs from *The Color Purple*.

Deliver this as a monologue or a soliloquy and decide what role the audience plays in hearing it.

Activity three – Creating parallel and response scenes

The Color Purple is a text that transcends across generations and connects to the modern-day world. We can use the story and characters as stimuli for creating response scenes.

In groups, use the structure of the following scenes and see if you can create something contemporary. E.g.

- The Easter Dinner: a family sitting down to dinner and discussing a contentious topic, news story or event. Every member of the family has a different opinion, so a conflict is created. Can the family resolve the conflict or find a common view, or does the scene explode?
- Sofia's imprisonment: Sofia is put in prison in the musical because the mayor's wife suggests Sofia becomes her maid and Sofia refuses. How can this scene relate to freedom of speech being hijacked and communities being muted? How could you dramatise action that happens offstage in the musical?
- Harpo's juke joint: Harpo sets up his own bar in the woods and asks Shug Avery to sing there – she causes a sensation. Imagine that you are creating a space for an artist to have a voice and share their artistry. How might you promote this space and artist in a modern way, such as through YouTube, Instagram or TikTok?

STAGING

The Color Purple has been staged on a traditional and virtual stages, especially in the lockdown period of 2021. Both versions of the piece have taught directors, actors and choreographers to carefully consider their use of space and how they convey a sense of community, friendship, intimacy or conflict with or without touch.

Activity one:

Take a scene that you have adapted (or a scene from the musical) and stage it in an outdoor environment e.g a park or an outdoor theatre space.

If acting happens outside:

- How does the acoustics of your surroundings impact the quality of your show?
- Have one person act as the director of the group and have them feedback on what is effective for conveying the story – for the audience and the actors.

Another example of this could be exploring:

- Online performances
- Access performances (people who are neurodivergent, deaf communities etc)
- Performances for audiences with English as a second language

The class may want to think about how the following techniques might aid the storytelling for different stages:

- Eye contact
- Blocking and where people are positioned in the space
- Voice
- Gesture
- Movement/choreography

Activity two:

Proxemics and levels are important tools in *The Color Purple*. This can be seen in scenes such as Nettie writing to Celie from Africa and the blossoming romance between Shug and Celie.

In small groups, bring scenes to life whilst exploring the idea of distance and levels in performance.

- Do you notice character relationships becoming more intimate or distant?
- What does this show to the audience?

CHARACTER EXERCISE

In this exercise, we'll focus on one scene from the musical, the Easter Dinner scene at Mister and Celie's house. In early rehearsals, the director and actors read scenes in detail and think about character's motivations, emotions and how the text should be delivered.

Imagine that you are at a "table read" of the play. You are either an actor playing one of the characters, or a member of the creative team.

As you explore the questions below, think about how this informs your ideas of the script, characters, and ideas for the musical.

THE EASTER DINNER



Activity:

- 1) In groups, read the scene and perform it with the characters of Celie, Shug, Mister, Sofia, Squeak, Old Mister and Grady.
- 2) Break out into smaller groups (one group per character) to discuss their role and development at the dinner, as below.
- 3) As the students embody the protagonists or discuss their roles: consider the motivations, physicality, dialogue, and power structures established/questioned in this scene.

Shug

Shug has returned with her new partner which internally breaks Mister's heart. As the meal progresses, Shug's true intentions behind her return become clear.

- What are Shug's true motivations for marriage?
- How does Shug show her alliance with Celie at the dinner?

Celie

After years of neglect and mistreatment at the hands of Mister, Celie finally breaks her silence. Instead of writing her frustrations down, she vocalises them in front of everyone.

- Consider the emotional impact of discovering her sister's letters. How do you think this changes Celie's personality?
- Why does Celie curse Mister? Mister heartbroken by Shug's new marriage, Mister falls back into his old personality trait which involves making others feel small for him to feel superior. However, he verbally assaults Celie for the last time ('You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. I shoulda just locked you up. Just let you out to work'), resulting in the ultimate play for dominance in their marriage.

Mister

- Why does Mister stay quiet about his heartbreak towards Shug and her husband?
- How does Celie's curse and defiance affect his position of power in his family?
- How does Mister show signs of misogyny? (Hatred towards Black women)

Sofia

Once a proud, outspoken woman, Sofia has been broken by the weight of the world. In this scene, she seems to be swallowed by the conversation and responds in short sentences to avoid conflict and being perceived as confrontational. However, during this scene, Sofia begins to find her voice again.

- Consider Sofia's displacement at the dinner table. How could you show her discomfort without stating her emotions verbally?
- What causes Sofia to break her silence and return to her former self?



MUSIC

Music is used in the musical to:

- Express thoughts and feelings
- Show a character's development or ambitions
- Keep the pace of the story alive

Activity one:

As a class (or in groups) create a song to promote *The Color Purple* to an audience who have never seen it before. In the song, you may want to include:

- A summary of the musical
- Touch on the themes discussed within the piece
- Try to add the emotion behind the words when singing/performing.
- As the play draws on musical inspiration from the 1900-1940's, students may want to research, use or fuse musical styles from the 21st century, for example Blues with hip hop or Jazz with EDM/Dance music.

Activity two:

There are loads of rich, in-depth themes that can be explored in *The Color Purple* such as:

- Race
- Religion
- Sexuality
- Equality
- Family
- Communication

Choose a theme and match it to a character from the story.

Write a song about how this character feels about the theme and its impact on their life.

For example:

Character name: Shug Avery

Genre: Jazz

Theme: Sexuality

Lyrics:

*All my life I've had to fight
I don't need to no man to put me right
I got Celie, my baby!
She's driving me crazy
But I'll love her with all of my might.*

Try to add a melody underneath the lyrics to see how the sound of the words impact the meaning and mood of the audience.



THANK YOU



Thank you for reading *The Color Purple* learning resource! We hope it's aided your understanding of the piece and inspires another generation to fall in love with this phenomenal story.

This pack and production would not have been possible without the following creatives:

CAST AND CREW OF *THE COLOR PURPLE* 2022

TINUKE CRAIG DIRECTOR
LAKESHA ARIE ANGELO REVIVAL DIRECTOR
REBEKAH JONES EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
DUDLEY HINTON CREATIVE PRODUCER
LAURA BLACKLEY PRODUCER (MADE AT CURVE)
ALEX LOWDE SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER
ALEX PARKER MUSICAL SUPERVISOR
MARTIN HIGGINS ORCHESTRATOR
MARK SMITH CHOREOGRAPHER
JOSHUA PHARO LIGHTING AND VIDEO DESIGNER
TOM MARSHALL SOUND DESIGNER
CYNTHIA DE LA ROSA WIGS, HAIR AND MAKE-UP DESIGNER
KAY MAGSON CDG CASTING DIRECTOR
HAZEL HOLDER DIALECT COACH
GERRARD MARTIN INTIMACY CONSULTANT
KEV MCCURDY FIGHT DIRECTOR
SAM PATERSON PRODUCTION MANAGER
IAN OAKLEY MUSICAL DIRECTOR/ASSISTANT HEAD OF SOUND AND VIDEO
ANGEL ROSSELL DE PABLOS ASSISTANT HEAD OF STAGE AND AUTOMATION
JAMES DAINTY ASSISTANT HEAD OF STAGE AND AUTOMATION
MARTIN PICKARD HEAD OF WARDROBE
RICARDO PARDO ASSOCIATE DESIGNER
GAIL PARMEL ASSOCIATE CHOREOGRAPHER
IONA WAITE ASSOCIATE CHOREOGRAPHER
ELLIE VERKERK ASSOCIATE MUSICAL DIRECTOR
NAOMI THOMPSON COSTUME SUPERVISOR
NICOLE IROH WIGS, HAIR AND MAKE-UP SUPERVISOR
NIGEL BAILEY WELLBEING PRACTITIONER

STAGE MANAGEMENT

RICHARD LLEWELYN COMPANY MANAGER
JAN BAIRD DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER
FRANCESCA MAI ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER/BOOK COVER
MILTON ROBINSON TECHNICAL ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

TECHNICAL TEAM

PAUL CASSIDY PRODUCTION CARPENTER NO.1
JAMES MUSTOW PRODUCTION CARPENTER NO.2
LAURA HOWELLS LIGHTING PROGRAMMER
ANDREW TAYLOR LX/RELIGHT
SAM PALMER, KAY MARK ADAMS and **ANDREW SULLY** PRODUCTION SOUND ENGINEERING
JACK HARPER VIDEO PROGRAMMER

LEARNING PROGRAMME TEAM

Birmingham Hippodrome

JO WRIGHT HEAD OF LEARNING
ASHLEE ELIZABETH-LOLO LEARNING AND PARTICIPATION ARTIST/CREATOR OF *THE COLOR PURPLE* LEARNING RESOURCE
ADAYA HENRY CONSULTANT LEARNING ARTIST
SIMONE MENDEZ CONSULTANT LEARNING ARTIST
AMY STUTZ DIGITAL CONTENT MANAGER

Curve

KAY HARDIMAN HEAD OF CREATIVE PROGRAMMES
CHANDNI MISTRY CREATIVE PRACTITIONER



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT THESE ORGANISATIONS AND WEBSITES:

Smithsonian Institution

<https://www.si.edu/>

Black Lives Matter

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/>

Stephen Lawrence Day Foundation

<https://stephenlawrenceday.org/>

The King Centre

<https://thekingcenter.org/>

Black History Month

<https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/>

Alice Walker

<https://alicewalkersgarden.com/>

Curve

<https://www.curveonline.co.uk/>

Curve Classroom YouTube Playlist

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1CU_dYGkefFUP5zS8XYNwIF3tYCuViDt

