



The Main Feature

Season 44 – Issue 4 – Screening 24 October 2024

The Color Purple

USA, 1985, 154 mins, Cert 15

Director	Stephen Spielberg
Written by	Menno Meyjes, from the book by Alice Walker
Cinematography	Allen Daviau
Production Design	J Michael Riva
Music	Quincy Jones

Cast

Whoopi Goldberg	Celie
Danny Glover	Albert Johnson ('Mister')
Margaret Avery	Shug Avery
Oprah Winfrey	Sophia
Willard Pugh	Harpo
Akosua Busia	Nettie
Desreta Jackson	Young Celie
Adolph Cesar	Old Mister Johnson
Rae Dawn Chong	Squeak
Dana Ivey	Miss Millie
Bennet Guillory	Grady



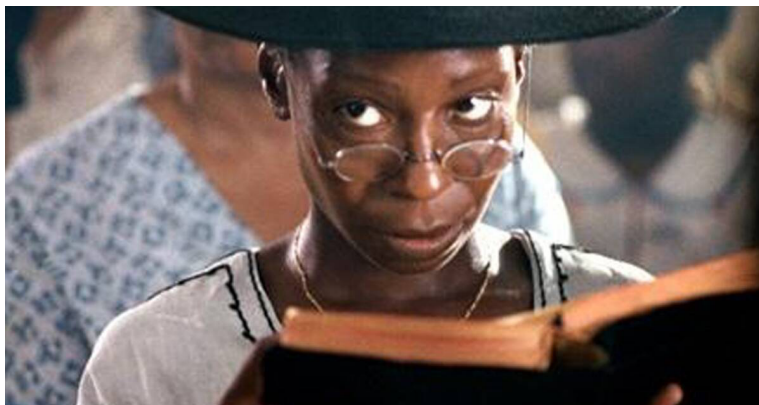
Tonight's film is a lavish adaptation of *The Color Purple*, the best-known novel of Alice Walker. Born in rural Georgia in 1944, Walker was the youngest of eight children. Her parents were sharecroppers and her mother was also a part-time seamstress. But she attended college in Georgia and New York. Her literary career began with the publication of a collection of poetry in 1968. She published three novels and short story collections between 1970 and 1976 before *The Color Purple* in 1982.

It is a novel composed of letters, most of them sent to God by Celie (Whoopi Goldberg), a poor 14 year-old African-American girl living in rural Georgia in the early 1900s. This difficult-to-read book recounts the brutal experiences she endures through a toxic combination of the patriarchy and racism over the next 35 years. It includes her husband Albert Johnson (known as Mister, Danny Glover), her sister Nettie (Akosua Busia), her step son Harpo (Willard Pugh), his wife Sophia (Oprah Winfrey), and the singer Shug Avery (Margaret Avery), Mister's former lover.

The New York Times Book Review wrote that it is a 'striking and consummately well-written novel', praising its powerful emotional impact and epistolary structure. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983 (making Roberts the first black woman to win for fiction) and the National Book Award for fiction in the same year.

Stephen Spielberg's 1985 film of the book was his eighth feature. Previously, he had made highly successful crowd-pleasing films including *Jaws* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *ET the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). *The Color Purple*, as a coming-of age period drama, was Spielberg's first film on dramatic subject matter, and in his biography he is quoted as expressing reservations about tackling the project: 'It's the risk of being judged and accused of not having the sensibility to do character studies'.

The producer Kathleen Kennedy acknowledged the problems inherent in adapting *The Color Purple*. 'Whenever you make a movie from a book, you try to absorb the impact of the book, recalling the emotions of the original material. This becomes the foundation on which you build the movie. The most difficult job of all in adapting a book this rich in texture for the screen is determining what stays and what goes. Certainly, those choices were very difficult for *The Color Purple*. [...] We all felt that there was a lot to live up to with this book, and if the script could not give us the same impact, we shouldn't do it'.



Did they succeed? The New York Times said: 'Mr. Spielberg has looked on the sunny side of Miss Walker's novel, fashioning a grand, multi-hanky entertainment that is as pretty and lavish as the book is plain. If the book is set in the harsh, impoverished atmosphere of rural Georgia, the movie unfolds in a cosy, comfortable, flower-filled wonderland. ... Some parts of it are rapturous and stirring, others hugely improbable, and the film moves unpredictably from one

mode to another. From another director, this might be fatally confusing, but Mr. Spielberg's showmanship is still with him. Although the combination of his sensibilities and Miss Walker's amounts to a colossal mismatch, Mr. Spielberg's *The Color Purple* manages to have momentum, warmth and staying power all the same'.

The director Oliver Stone disagreed saying it's 'an excellent movie, and it was an attempt to deal with an issue that had been overlooked, and it wouldn't have been done if it hadn't been Spielberg. And it's not like everyone says, that he ruined the book. That's horseshit. Nobody was going to *do* the book. He made the book live again'.

The film was financially successful and won support from many critics. Time Out said 'Due in no small measure to a superb cast spearheaded by Whoopi Goldberg, this is a powerful and honourable attempt to wrest an unusual book into the populist Hollywood mainstream'. But The Age noted 'No anger, and scarcely any emotional or dramatic energy of any sort, is allowed to ruffle this film's pretty surface'. The film was nominated for eleven Academy Awards but won none (Whoopi Goldberg lost to Geraldine Page in the best actress category).

The film has been remade as a musical in 2023, starring Fantasia Barrino as Celie, Taraji P Henson as Shug Avery and Danielle Brooks as Sophia.

Perhaps the last word should be left to Alice Walker herself. My 2021 edition of her book includes Walker's introductory Note for the Reader. Written in 2017, she recalls seeing the film in Albuquerque, New Mexico, some 30 years after she was involved in the film's production where she was production consultant and offered a first draft of the screenplay (which was not used). She said:



'What stood out for me, watching the film, was how different it is from the book'. She was concerned about the introduction of 'the big house' into the film; and the physical appearance of the character Mister. And she felt the landscape was wrong, with flowers that do not belong in the southern United States. She was worried that audiences would misunderstand parts of the plot because the film sometimes lacked clarity. She admired some aspects of the film but concluded 'I was reminded again of something I had held fast to on the set in Hollywood as we were creating the film of *The Color Purple*: Thank the Goddess there is a book'.

Michael Hipkins



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Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 30 October 2024
Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.

Dame Maggie Smith 1934-2024

Dame Maggie Smith died last month, aged 89. Her obituaries celebrated her career on stage (I recall seeing her performance in Noel Coward's *Private Lives* with her then husband Robert Stephens in the early 1970s) and on screen. The younger generation may only know of her in Harry Potter and Downton Abbey, but the Club has been a fan of hers for more than 35 years. Here are six of her films we have shown – which does not include *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, for which she won an Oscar. An omission to rectify?

A Private Function (UK, 1984, director: Malcolm Mowbray). Set in 1947, with food



rationing still in place, an illegally reared pig destined for a party to celebrate the wedding of Princess Elizabeth to

Prince Philip, is stolen. Maggie Smith plays Joyce, the wife of local chiropodist Gilbert Chilver (Michael Palin). Smith won the BAFTA for Best Actress. Shown by the club on 11 December 1986.

Oh! What a Lovely War (UK, 1969, director Richard Attenborough). Adapted from Joan Littlewood's stage musical with an ensemble cast including Maggie Smith as a music hall star who encourages the men in the audience to enlist ('On Saturday I'm willing, if you'll only take the shilling, to make a man of any one of you'). The film won six BAFTAs and a Golden

Globe. Shown by the club on 9 May 1995, with a reaction score of 7.6.

Gosford Park (UK, USA, Italy; 2001; director Robert Altman). Scripted by Julian Fellowes, this is a satirical, black comedy and mystery in which Sir William McCordle (Michael Gambon) is murdered at his house during a shooting party which includes Ivor Novello. Maggie Smith plays the dowager Lady Trentham, the aunt of Sir William's wife, who arrives in a chauffeur-driven Austin 7, in a precursor of her role in Downton Abbey. Shown by the club on 11 September 2003 with a reaction score of 7.78



Ladies in Lavender (UK, 2004, director Charles Dance). Charles Dance's debut as



director in a screenplay he adapted from a 1908 short story. Maggie Smith plays Janet Widdington alongside Judi Dench as her sister Ursula. They discover a handsome stranger washed up on the beach below their cottage in

Cornwall who disrupts their quiet and orderly lives. The Observer commented on the 'beautiful setting, a succession of implausible incidents, and characteristically excellent work from Smith (all suppression and stoicism) and Dench (exuding unfulfilled yearning)'. Shown by the club on 27 April 2006 with a reaction score of 8.37.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (UK, 2011, director John Madden). Based on *These Foolish Things*, a novel by Deborah Moggach, Maggie Smith is Muriel Donnelly, a former housekeeper who moves to India for a cheaper, quicker hip operation as one of a disparate group of retirees who opt for a retirement hotel in India, bringing various pieces of baggage (physical and emotional) with them. Muriel eventually helps out with the

book-keeping and prevents the hotel from closing. Shown by the club on 10 January 2013 with a reaction score of 8.39

Downton Abbey – the New Era (UK, USA; 2022; director Simon Curtis). In the second cinema spin-off from the long-running television series, again scripted by Julian Fellowes, Maggie Smith is Violet Crawley, the dowager Countess of Grantham, who intrigues the family by announcing she has inherited a villa in the South of France. One critic noted: 'Obviously, the best thing about Downton Abbey is still Lady Violet Crawley (Maggie Smith). Her grace can sustain one, and even two, inane movies'. Shown by the club on 14 December 2023 with a reaction score of 7.58

Michael Hipkins

Comments and reactions to: **Winners**

No of reaction slips received = 23

Average score = 6.00

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	~	~	8	10	2	3	~	~

A bit disjointed and sometimes difficult to follow but gentle and nuanced. Enjoy foreign films and a different perspective on life. Beautiful photography
Different type of film but entertaining
Hard to connect with the characters, but a fascinating view of rural Iran
A little disjointed in parts – didn't fit together. I think I blinked and missed the end!
Wonderful scenery. A view of a different world!
The kids were very good acting. Didn't understand the ending

Slow but interesting

Strange ending

Slow, confusing

Strange ending! But I enjoyed it

Position	Film	Average score
1	The Great Escaper	8.00
2	Winners	6.00
3	Barbie	5.59

Forthcoming attraction: 14 November 2024 – **The Taste of Things**



Vanishingly rare are pictures that capture this kind of relationship so satisfyingly.
Observer

It's the chemistry between former partners Binoche and Magimel that makes the film a sensory feast to send hearts fluttering as well as stomachs rumbling. Radio Times

Dramatically, this may seem slight. But bounteous pleasures lie in the intimacy of the acting and in the exquisite cinematic and culinary craftsmanship on display. Empire

The Taste of Things feels like a return to the very best kind of comfort viewing, a work that nourishes the soul and whets the appetite but without the sprinkling of irony.
Financial Times