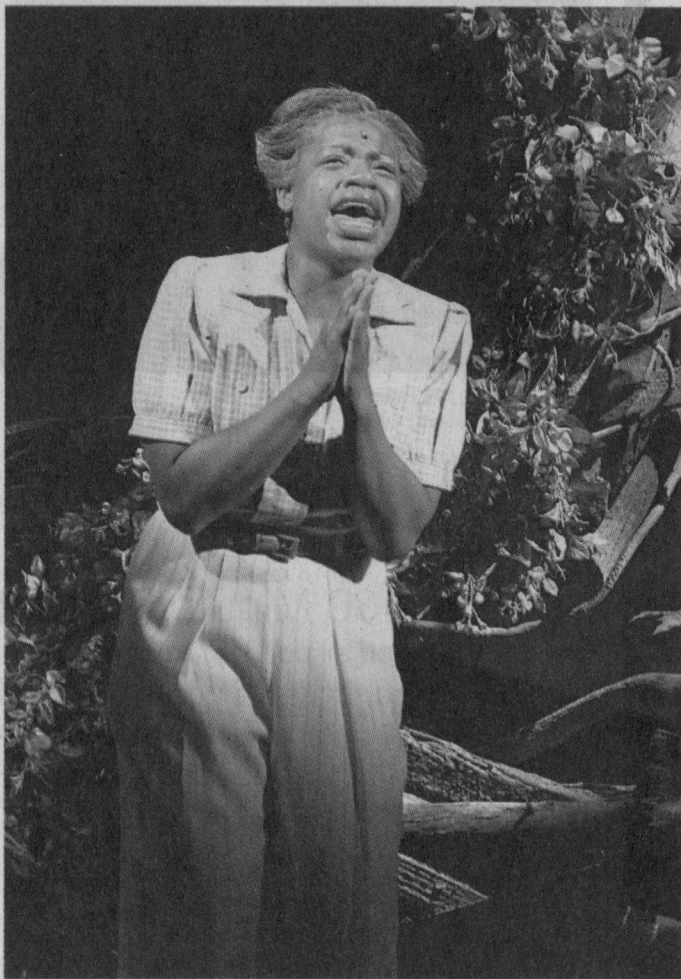


And as the Abused Heroine, A Pop Princess



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

The Color Purple.

Fantasia, an "American Idol" winner, stars at the Broadway Theater as Celie in the musical based on Alice Walker's novel.

As someone who has remained immune to the addictive attractions of "American Idol," I was steeling myself to greet the arrival of Fantasia on Broadway with the kind of hand-wringing that proud partisans of the theatat often reserve for despised interlopers from television and pop. O the outrage! O the crass commercialism! O the lack of discipline and proper vocal training!

**CHARLES
ISHERWOOD**

**THEATER
REVIEW**

If you are confused already — Another Disney show on Broadway? How on earth can they do "The Sorcerer's Apprentice"? — you are probably one of the few Americans unindoctrinated into the cult of "Idol." But Disney has not created a stage version of the classic animated movie "Fantasia." Instead a more fully animated Fantasia — the young woman who bested Jennifer Hudson in Season 3 of the singing-contest series on Fox — is now starring in "The Color Purple," the Broadway adaptation of the Alice Walker novel produced and promoted by Oprah Winfrey.

And those hands will have to go unwrung: She's pretty terrific. So terrific that this earnest but mechanical musical is more effective and affecting than it was when it yawned open a year and a half ago at the Broadway Theater.

Mind you, it is hardly a masterwork. Sodden with plot and stuffed with pleasant but generic pop, R&B and gospel music, the show feels like a singing version of a Reader's Digest condensed book. But in the central role of the down-trodden Celie, whose long trudge to emotional fulfillment the musical traces, Fantasia exudes a sweetness, simplicity and honesty that gives it a core of authentic feeling.

She is, to begin with, more naturally suited to the role than LaChanze, who won a Tony for it last year. (Performers in possession of last names need not apply apparently.) Just 22 years old, Fantasia is wholly convincing as a

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gawky adolescent yanked from girlish daydreams into the brutal truths of life when she is impregnated by her father. Squirming with excitement and awe as she fondles the baby soon to be pulled from her arms, her big shy smile could break your heart. As Celie moves through a life of poverty and hardship, the return of that sunbeam grin is a moving testament to the innocence of heart she retains despite all the setbacks she endures.

Much is made of Celie's unattractiveness. She is essentially sold off by her father to a brutish husband as if she were a workhorse with a lame leg. LaChanze, though a skilled singer and actress, couldn't disguise her natural beauty and poise. Fantasia possesses her own beauty, but it is more idiosyncratic, and as Celie she moves with the uneven amble of a woman trained at a young age to debilitating drudgery and a carelessness about her looks.

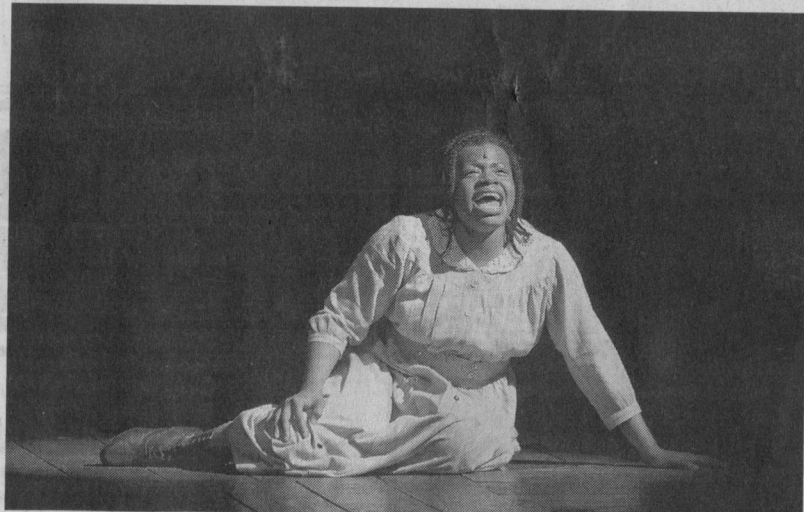
Her singing is strong if hardly spectacular by the standards of soulful belters, prize or no prize. Unfortunately Celie is not given much in the

way of rewarding music in the score by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis and Stephen Bray. This is probably a strategy designed to symbolize Celie's status as a woman with no voice in her own destiny. But in theatrical terms it's unsatisfying.

Poor Celie is relegated to the margins of her own musical as Elisabeth Withers-Mendes's bawdy bad girl, Shug Avery, shimmies in the spotlight. Even when Celie at last works up the courage to leave her husband, she is perversely allowed but a few bars of music to lay down a personal manifesto. The woman's life is misery; for God's sake, people, at least give her a few good songs.

On the occasions when Celie lets loose, you can't complain that an alumna of "American Idol" is despoiling the standards of Broadway musicianship with the kind of yowling histrionics the television show is famed for. That kind of high-octane note bending is already built into the climactic moments in "The Color Purple." At least Fantasia unleashes it with a feeling of connection to the dramatic moment.

She is not the only newcomer to the cast. Ms. Withers-Mendes, ele-



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Fantasia as Celie, who survives and thrives after a life of bad treatment.

gant and sassy as Celie's savior/soul-sister/lover, Shug, is one of the few holdovers, along with Krisha Marcano in the minor role of Squeak. NaTasha Yvette Williams and Chaz Lamar Shepherd now play the warring spouses Sofia and Harpo with an emphasis on their status as comic relief. Darlesia Cearcy sings powerfully

as Celie's sister, Nettie. But there is virtually nothing Alton Fitzgerald White can do to enliven the role of Mister, Celie's scowling husband, who turns repentant and noble in the final scenes. Mister is the rare fictional character who is just as boring when he's bad as he is when he's good.