Tim Robey recommends... The Color Purple (1985)

The weepie that made Whoopie a star has the strongest female cast of any Spielberg film, says Tim Robey.

Whoopie Goldberg and Margaret Avery in The Color Purple Photo: Snap Stills/Rex Features

By Tim Robey
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It’s strange that The Color Purple should feel like a movie that needs defending. After all, Steven Spielberg’s first attempt at an adult, prestige literary adaptation got 11 Oscar nominations in 1985, but the real clue to its ambivalent reception is that it won none.

For some, the very idea of Spielberg trying to handle the complex narrative of black oppression in Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel was obscurely shameful, as if only a black director (ideally a black female director) would have been in a position to do it justice. Rather ironically, Out of Africa, which has few black characters, walked off with the prizes that year.

There are passages of Spielberg’s film that simply don’t work – the more happy-clappy embroiderings sit awkwardly in his hands, and even at two and a half hours, the generation-spanning saga of Celie Harris (Whoopi Goldberg) and her sister Nettie (Akosua Busia) is obliged to rush through most of the latter’s experiences as a missionary in West Africa. But the movie has emotional generosity to spare, and it’s
proof that good intentions needn’t always pave the way to hell. Spielberg’s handling of Walker’s story is sober and impassioned without being cripplingly reverential.

At the time, the director was wary of doing “a movie about people” for the first time in his career. It marks the first of many and, with Amistad (1997) and Lincoln (2012), the first in an unofficial trilogy about slavery and its repercussions. What really sets it apart, though, is that it has far and away the strongest gallery of female characters in any of Spielberg’s work, and it stands or falls on the strength of that perspective.

As it turned out, there was no surer way of making the movie work than simply by casting the heck out of it. Busia’s wide, optimistic smile is something you miss when she’s not on screen. This is crucial, as her absence hangs over most of the film – no scene is more upsetting than that in which Nettie is literally prised away from her sister by Celie’s husband, Albert (Danny Glover).

Supporting Actress nominations went to both Oprah Winfrey, as Albert’s proud daughter-in-law Sofia, and Margaret Avery, as the bisexual blues singer Shug, whose arrival brings Celie out of her shell.

Spielberg admits to soft-pedalling Shug and Celie’s lesbian relationship to gain the film a PG certificate, but his camera suggestively drifts away after they kiss, and I think we know what’s going on. Besides, Avery’s rendition of Miss Celie’s Blues is a sultry spine-tingler. The perfect opening lyrics – “Sista! You been on my mind…” make it a song for Celie that’s also ventriloquism on her behalf.

Celie gets none of Nettie’s letters, because Albert ferrets them away. Plunging the camera into the empty postbox, a black hole of disappointment, is exactly the kind of shrewd movie-ish touch a storyteller of Spielberg’s ingenuity knows how to supply where others wouldn’t.
All the film’s most communicative moments, though, are Goldberg’s. How did she come up with this performance? It’s an instant career-topper. Meekness isn’t an attribute we associate with her, to put it mildly, but every gesture, as she rests her face on her fists, or hides everything but her gleaming eyes when Shug is singing to her, feels organic and moving and right. She’s the book’s narrator, speaks less than anyone else on screen, and still tells us everything.

The Color Purple is available on DVD from Warner Home Video

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