

NOW

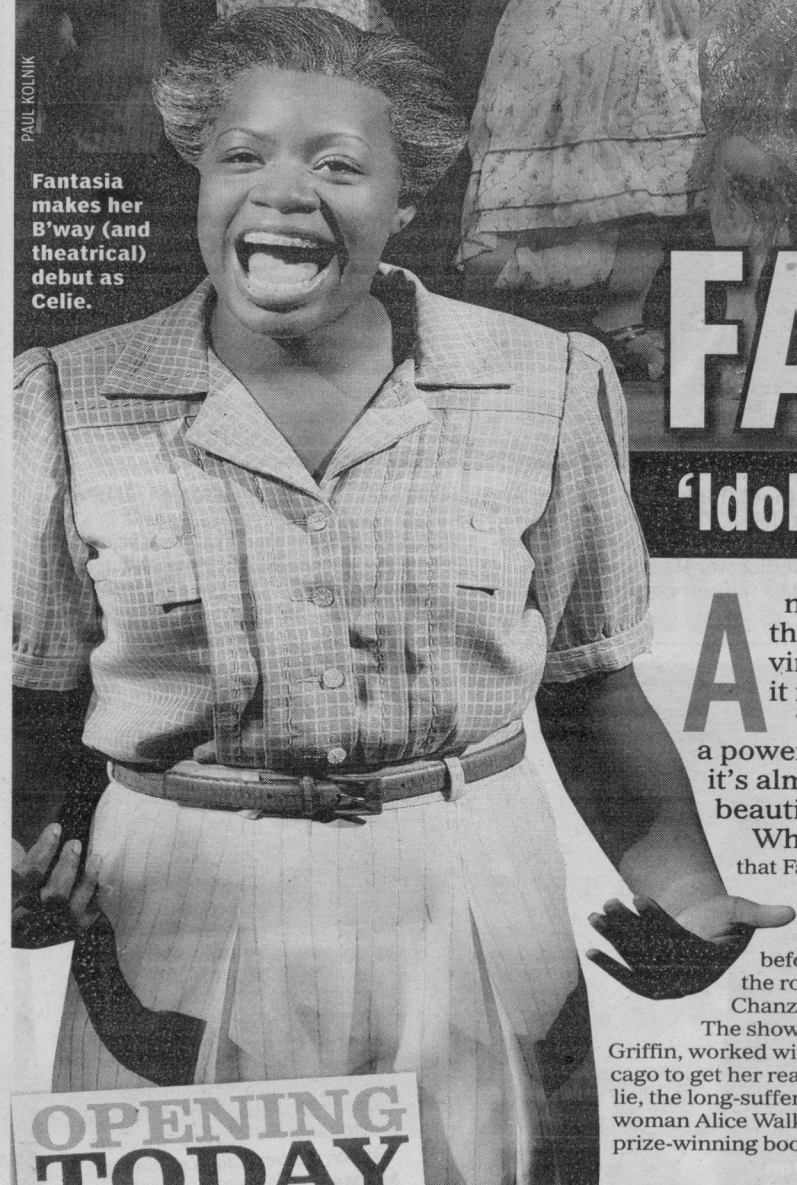
PAUL KOLNIK

Fantasia makes her B'way (and theatrical) debut as Celie.

'The Color Purple'
Broadway Theatre, 1681 Broadway
Tickets: \$26.25-\$111.25
(212) 239-6200

FANTASIA A HIT

'Idol' brings her 'Purple' passion to B'way



OPENING TODAY

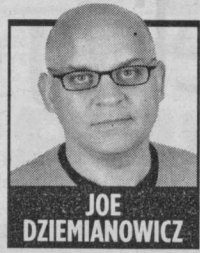
A new face on Broadway has done something that producer Oprah Winfrey couldn't — convinced me "The Color Purple" is a must-see. But it is right now and will be through October. "American Idol" winner Fantasia gives such a powerful performance in her Broadway debut that it's almost, to borrow a lyric from the show, "too beautiful for words."

What makes it even more of a triumph is that Fantasia had never acted on stage or even seen a Broadway show before stepping into the role that won La Chanze a Tony last year. The show's director, Gary Griffin, worked with Fantasia in Chicago to get her ready to play Celie, the long-suffering Southern woman Alice Walker created in her prize-winning book. Boy, Griffin

did a good job. Fantasia's natural ease and honesty come through from the moment she steps onstage at the Broadway Theatre. She doesn't try to sell her acting or singing, but creates a beautiful aura around Celie that draws you in. It's a deeper "Purple" as a result.

Spanning two continents and 40 years, the story is a challenge to adapt to the stage, and the show isn't always effective.

The long second-act opening scene set in Africa, colorful and kinetic as it is, breaks the momentum. And I'm still not sold on having three comic busybodies comment on the action in such a serious story. "Color Purple" remains a lavish and soulful production with a strong cast, though, and its songs grow on you every time you hear them.



JOE DZIEMIANOWICZ

That's certainly true of the title number, introduced in the show by the sexy juke-joint singer Shug Avery (Tony nominee Elisabeth Withers-Mendes, ravishing as ever) and performed by the whole company at the curtain call. That moment follows Celie's exultant and rousing finale, "I'm Here."

It is a fitting song for Fantasia.
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