

# 'Idol' worship fitting for B'way's Fantasia

By CLIVE BARNES

**T**HAT she could sing, we knew. Ever since the moment she launched into Gershwin's "Summertime" on "American Idol," there was no doubt.

But that she could act . . . and act so wonderfully. So tenderly, so touchingly, so effortlessly. That came as a surprise.

I'm talking, if you haven't guessed, about Fantasia, who has taken over so commandingly the role of Celie in the

musical "The Color Purple" at the Broadway Theatre.

Four cheers for Fantasia, for face it, Alice Walk-

## THEATER REVIEW

### THE COLOR PURPLE



Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St.; (212) 239-6200.

er's 1982 epistolary novel of the rural South "The Color Purple" — made up of letters mostly to God from Celie, its narrator heroine — was an odd choice on which to base a Broadway musical, and it needs all the help it can get.

Its bleak first act has narrative difficulties, and the second act — with that odder than odd African dance dream sequence — simply sinks into a morass of sentimentality.

What held together this musical of dauntless black feminism was its performance.

Now, among the leading roles, only the terrific Elisabeth Withers-Mendes' siren-like blues singer Shug Avery remains; every other leading part is new.

I mean to take nothing away from LaChanze's luminous original Celie, fighting spiteful male oppression to find joyful vindication in simple self-esteem — oddly, for its time and place, racism seems scarcely an issue here — but there is some elemental quality to Fantasia that is either greatness or something close to it.

The musical takes Celie from a homely teenager with a good soul but a bruised



Fantasia makes even grown men cry as Celie in "The Color Purple."

heart right through to a self-confident woman in her late 50s — and the 22-year-old Fantasia, in what I presume is her stage debut, carries it off as honestly and as powerfully as she idiomatically sings the rock, soul and blues of the coolly efficient score.

I feel a lot in the theater — I wouldn't stick in this business if I didn't — but usually I don't cry. With this performance, I found tears running down my cheeks.

She has wonderful help from all the other newcomers — I fear I can only list them for their all their brilliance: actually NaTasha Yvette Williams' feisty Sofia refuses just to be listed, but the others are Alton Fitzgerald White, Chaz Lamar Shepherd, Darlesia Cearcy, Krishna Marciano and Larry Marshall.

If you haven't seen "The Color Purple," see it now; if you have seen it, see it again. Something extraordinary is happening at the Broadway Theatre that is not to be missed.