

Alice Walker's timeless classic "The Color Purple" graces the Amelia Musical Playhouse stage next with a mid-May debut. The story centers on Celie, a young Black woman fraught with emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Her personal awakening over the course of 40 years continues to be a source of strength and inspiration for women of all cultures.

Jessica Mainor, a 10-year veteran at Amelia Musical Playhouse, won the lead role after tirelessly urging the local theater to take on "The Color Purple." The 25-year-old actress is an eighth-generation resident of Nassau County.

"I have been in love with the show for forever. I'm very comfortable with (Amelia Musical Playhouse owner) Jill (Dillingham) and all the patrons of the theater that are involved in production," Mainor said. "I always kind of tried to put the bug in their ear and told them if they ever did it, then please contact me and that I would be interested."

Mainor, like most, has seen Steven Spielberg's film adaption from 1985 starring Whoopi Goldberg as Celie; however, she admits the story didn't hit home with her until reading the source material at the insistence of a friend.

Her initial connection with the characters in the book fully blossomed once Mainor got to see a musical production of "The Color Purple" in Atlanta.

"It's timeless. It's just a story of black women doing their thing, trying to survive," Mainor said. "The thing that's kind of groundbreaking and maybe a little bit more relevant to today is Celie coming out with her sexuality and realizing that she is in love with a woman. And that now, sadly, is still like a radical idea. I think people really gravitate toward a relatable person, relatable story."

For this production, AMP casted actors from different counties. Mainor said she's never seen so many new people involved in a single production at the local theater.

"(I'm) kind of frustrated that it took us this long to have this opportunity for people of color," she said. "(I'm) kind of frustrated that they're not all from here. A lot of our actors and performers are driving from other counties because they also want this opportunity, and it's also not available where they come from. It's something to be celebrated, but you get frustrated because you wish it was more normal, but I'll still celebrate the little things. This is definitely a big victory for us."

As lead actress, Mainor is tasked with belting out tunes from the 2015 Broadway production starring Cynthia Erivo in a character-defining portrayal of Celie.

"I think Cynthia Erivo brought it to the mainstream for one. Maybe she's not a household name for everybody, but I think she really made the musical more popular than the book," Mainor said.

Mainor has shied away from professional singing lessons in favor of random sing-a-longs with family and friends, but now she grapples with a musical score that demands emotional delivery across many different styles - jazz, ragtime, gospel, African music and blues.

"The high notes are always a challenge, especially toward the end of the show when I've been singing and like giving it my all. Then they expect me to pull out a couple whistle tones. I'll still pull it through, but that'll be my challenge," Mainor humorously said. "Some people probably swear by vocal rest and taking it easy, but not me. I'm like the person who I just take it head on, and I sing it over and over again."

This kind of exhaustive preparation was made all the more grueling with "The Color Purple" readily exploring layers of emotional, physical and sexual abuse experienced by women in the early 1900s.

"It's almost like we're writing a fine line. It's such a freeing feeling to dig into those emotions that we can all relate to. I might not have the same exact experience as Celie, but we're all human. We all have the same emotions underneath and these tough scenes give me a chance to let those emotions out in a different and healthy way," Mainor said.

Directed by Deirdre Wallace and Ann Walsh, this local interpretation of "The Color Purple" premieres Thursday, May 19, at the playhouse. Tickets can be purchased online, in person or over the phone.

[mmahoney@fbnewsleader.com](mailto:mmahoney@fbnewsleader.com)

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