

British Theatre Guide

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Purlie The Musical

Ossie Davis, Philip Geld and Peter Udell, music by Gary Geld
Bridewell Theatre
(2004)

Anyone who thinks a funeral is an unlikely opening scene for a lively musical should hasten immediately to the Bridewell Theatre off Fleet Street where the American gospel story of *Purlie* is currently raising the roof and posing a 64,000-dollar question.

Why have we waited thirty years after this show opened at New York's Broadway Theatre to catch a glimpse of it here?

In fact Ossie Davis wrote the play *Purlie Victorious* ten years before Philip Rose and Peter Udell helped Davis with the book and Gary Geld supplied the irresistible score.

Irresistible, right from the moment the company assemble around Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee's coffin break into "Walk Him Up The Stairs". Now here's a way to enjoy a funeral!

It's easy enough to find a certain old world charm, even cotton pickin' charm, about a show which has been around since 1970- especially since it hasn't been around here. But this is spirited charm, the kind that grabs your feet and makes them tap.

No apologies for making comparisons with caricatures right out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the players are doing it all the time. Kate Bannister and Karl Swinyard have even built a set like a cabin. In fact, I get the feeling the company are having as much fun with us as we are with them!

Not least Tee Jaye as a lovable Purlie - but then he has been around this show for half his life. As for Joanna Francis, here's a "Fresh-Tie" of a Lulie Belle with a spring in her step, a gleam in her eye and a voice the like of which has hardly been heard in this country since Alma Cogan!

The warm mother figure of Missy Judson is amply filled by Victoria Wilson James and family, cotton workers, and other incidentals are played by the ensemble who, by the way, can also dance spectacularly whenever required, which is often.

Of course, no cotton plantation would be complete without white villainy and here this is splendidly represented, with a suspiciously mischievous touch, by John Lyons as Cotchipee. He also has a son Charlie who is on the right side from the start. So that's all right, then.

Certainly the old world charm has infected the lyrics with the result we get a lot of wisdom reworked by Alabama's old wives. Never mind, *Purlie* is none the worse for that and we are all the better for *Purlie*.

The production continues into October.

Reviewer: [Kevin Catchpole](#)