

Mary Pickford Film Center
DOCTOBER DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL, 2017
Film Discussion Guide

PURPLE DREAMS (2017)

A documentary film by Joanne Hock

DIRECTOR BIO: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2121786/?ref=tt_ov_dr

Hock has directed many documentaries. Review her Bio; what themes does she like to shoot?

STORY: Black youth stereotypes are turned upside down in this feature-length documentary film, Purple Dreams. This two and a half year journey pivoted around their production of The Color Purple, the Musical, and serves as an inspirational window into the lives of inner-city, at-risk students who succeed at their passion while embracing the transformative power of their arts education. -imdb.com

SETTINGS:

North Carolina School of the Arts (Charlotte, North Carolina)
Lincoln, Nebraska
Radio City Music Hall, NYC--TONY Awards

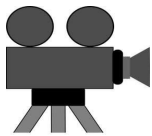
CAST:

Educators:

Cory Mitchell, Theatre Director
Matt Hinson, Music Director
Chip Davis, Technical Director
Barbara Wesselman, Costume Design
School Executive Director
Melody Sears—Principal
Julie Theobald, Exec. Director,
Educational Theatre Assoc

Students:

Phillip Briana
Mekhai Jordan
Javontre Ariel
Keston Shakayla
Danielle
Britany



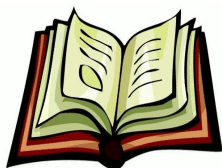
DOCUMENTARY STYLE:

Bill Nichols, film educator, has written many texts on documentary styles and his analysis is distilled in the article cited here. He categorizes documentaries into 6 styles.

<https://www.videomaker.com/article/c06/18423-six-primary-styles-of-documentary-production>

[Purple Dreams](#)

(describe the documentary style)



USING THIS GUIDE:

As students answer the following questions, they should be reminded to **cite textual evidence and inferences to support their analyses**. This guide correlates with Middle School CCSS in ELA and THE ARTS/THEATRE.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

1. What **feelings and ideas** did YOU have as you watched the film?
2. What **feelings and ideas** did the teachers and students express as they were interviewed and filmed?

To get started, here is a “Word Splash” of some of what they expressed in their own words. If you remember other words or phrases, add them! Then “dig in’ to the rest of the guide.

Passion Experiment Experiment Determined
Inner Strength
Hunger Possibility
Endless and Drive Burns in my soul
Escape Ready!
Disappointment Dedicated
Shine!
The arts keep me out off trouble,
grounded, doing the right thing.

THE NORTHWEST SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS--A SPECIAL PLACE FOR LEARNING:

The School is an Actual Place:

The Northwest School for the Arts is **one of many magnet schools** within the very large and diverse district of Charlotte-Mecklenburg (C-M) in North Carolina. It admits students in **grades 6-12** who have talent and dedication to Music, Theatre, Dance, or Visual Arts. Performing arts students are selected through audition and visual arts students are selected through portfolio assessment.

It’s Vision: According to C-M District vision/mission statement, their many magnet programs are designed for students **“to achieve highest levels of academic preparation and achievement within carefully tailored learning environments crafted to maximize opportunities for personal cognitive growth and skill development.”**

It's Success: NW School for the Arts is a **top-rated magnet school** in the U.S. and received a **National Magnet School of Excellence award**. Of the high schools within the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District, it also earned the highest graduation rate, >97%.

Learn more about the C-M District's philosophy of school-choice at.....

<http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/ci/MagnetPrograms/Pages/default.aspx>

Learn more about the academic achievement of the NW School of the Arts here...

<http://schools.cms.k12.nc.us/northwestHS/Pages/AboutOurSchool.aspx>

<https://www.publicschoolreview.com/northwest-school-of-the-arts-profile>

<https://www.greatschools.org/north-carolina/charlotte/1269-Northwest-School-Of-The-Arts/>

1. By viewing this film, you have essentially been a “guest” at this school—observing its daily routines, listening to adults and students tell their stories, and watching their rehearsals and performances. SO-- Why do you think NW School for the Arts won a **National Magnet School of Excellence Award**? If you were on the evaluation board, what criteria for excellence would YOU have used? Would any of these questions appear on YOUR list? Add additional criteria.

- Do the students want to be there? Do the teachers want to be there?
- Is there mutual respect between and among teachers and students?
- Are students fully engaged (body, mind, spirit) in relevant learning experiences?
- Do they feel safe and cared about?
- Do students have personal agency? That is, do they have opportunities to be personally creative and to have a voice?
- Are they developing artistic, intellectual, and creative skills for their future profession?
- Are they working hard? Do they willingly push their limits in order to become their “best selves”?
- Did they stick it out and graduate from high school?

2. Is this a school that YOU would like to attend? Explain. Would you change anything to make it even better? Explain.

3. How is the NW School of the Arts the same as or different from YOUR school?

- Which features of YOUR school develop your personal values, your mind, and your talents?
- Which features of YOUR school nurture your creativity, your distinctiveness, and your personal expression?
- Does YOUR school have a strong arts program? If not, why not?
- The film clearly articulates the impact of strong arts programs on learning, work-force skills, personal transformation, graduation rates, test scores, etc. How could YOU advocate for a strong arts program in your school or district?

4. These students seem to really enjoy this pressured environment. We see them dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, acting, building sets, constructing costumes, and managing backstage—and much of this takes place after their academic classes and on the weekends!

- Why do you think that the students and teachers agree to dedicate themselves to such an exhausting schedule?
- What rewards do they experience? Explain.

5. Corey Mitchell, Theatre teacher, comments early in the film that typical school districts support their athletic programs but not their arts programs. Why might that be? Compare and contrast theatre arts with athletics.

- How is learning through the arts similar/dissimilar to learn through sports?
- The performing arts require collaboration with specialists in different disciplines. Is this also true for athletic programs?
- Work-place values such as self-discipline, strong work-ethic, focus, and collaboration are at the core of performing arts. Is this also true of athletics programs?

6. For fun, use the link above to look at the other types of magnet schools the C-M School District offers.

- Do any of the theme excite and deeply engage YOU?
- If you could learn in the way that you learn best, what would that be? What are your passions and talents? What is YOUR learning style?

THE STUDENTS:

The NW School of the Arts is real; the students and teachers in this documentary film play themselves. Remember that some of the students you saw in the film are sitting in class today, just as you are!

1. In the documentary, the students tell us WHY they chose to apply to the NW School of the Arts. List their motivations and goals with examples drawn from the text of the film.

2. Do you feel an emotional connection to particular students? Describe the journey of that student all the way through—to the end of the music video that was produced 5 years later. How did the student “grow up”?

3. Some of the students also describe how the school has been a haven and refuge for them....

- What personal obstacles have some of the students chosen to overcome?
- What personal qualities do they exhibit that will help them to reach their future goals?
- Keston said that “Struggling hurts but struggling is what can get you through and it makes you want to keep going....and get somewhere.” Is struggle necessary to becoming an exemplary artist? To becoming a resilient and compassionate person? Explain.
- Javontre: “Performing keeps us out of the craziness. I can’t imagine my life without NW because when you have great friends in the same art form as you, you have a special bond that no one can take away. I’m performing for my brother [who was shot and killed]. And now that I know I have it within me, I have no reason but to succeed.” Describe the “craziness” he has escaped as well as what he has “within” him.

4. Describe the “meaning” or “purpose” that the students tell us they achieved by attending the NW School of the Arts.

- What life lessons have they learned?
- How did they become their “better selves”?

- What work-place habits have they developed?
- In what ways did their participation in the musical produce transformative change?
- Select a quotation and explain its meaning and impact for you.
 - Mekai: “I don’t know what I’d be doing without NW. I’d probably be in the workforce—surviving--but not completely happy and I wouldn’t feel like I have a purpose.” Explain.
 - Britany: “This is an example of making an impact and doing something positive.”
 - Javontre: “Dance has created such a beautiful world for me to express myself. When I’m upset I just go and dance. All the stress and anger that I hide inside just flies away.”

5. Some of the student actors were cast to play roles that were difficult for them to play either because the role was painfully too “close to home” (i.e. domestic violence, they had no prior life experience that matched those of their characters, or they were opposed to the character’s life-style choices. These students encountered deep inner conflict as a result.

- This is a typical dilemma for actors. How did these actors healthily resolve or reconcile their inner conflict?
- Have YOU ever had similar inner conflict? How did you resolve it?

THE EDUCATORS:

1. The NW School of the Arts is a **pre-professional career-training** school.
 - Did it seem like the teachers were highly skilled arts professionals?
 - Did the teachers support the students’ professional ambitions?
 - What professional skills did they teach the students?
 - What professional attitudes and values were also taught? Provide specific evidence.

2. This documentary was centrally about the leadership of Corey Mitchell, the theatre instructor. The students really adored and respected him. Why do you think the students felt that way about him? What did he say or do to earn their trust?

STRUCTURE--THE PRODUCTION PROCESS:

This documentary film is structured around the **steps in the process** of producing a musical play.

- Have YOU ever been a member of a theatre cast or crew?
- If so, which step in the process of rehearsing or performing a play did you enjoy the most?
- Share an interesting anecdote about your role and one step in the process with your classmates.

THE STEPS

- ❖ **Selecting the Play:** Corey admits that not all of the 43 other musical productions he has directed at NW have been big hits; he has even had some disappointing failures. But he learned from those failures and is now confident that he is ready AND there is enough

talent in the current class of theatre/music students to successfully perform a musical with mature themes, a difficult musical score, and a large ensemble cast.

❖ **Casting the Production—Group Auditions and Call Backs:** In addition to dancing rehearsed step sequences, each actor must prepare a monologue and a song for the character he/she most wishes to play.

1. When two different students auditioned for the same role, did they seem to have interpreted the character the same way or differently?
2. How did Corey help the students to overcome their initial stage fright and nervousness so that they could do their best?
3. How did Corey help the two contenders for the same role to remain friends? Do you think that teachers should intervene in this way?
4. After the cast list was posted, how did Britany handle her disappointment?

❖ **The Rehearsal Process:** During rehearsal, performing artists refine their work and practice their craft. Refinement takes place through self-reflection, problem-solving, and research into the “story” of the character. The actors must also dig deeply into their own experiences (emotional memory) in order to understand and communicate the character’s motivations. Sometimes, actors must research the context of the character’s life. In The Color Purple, the characters suffer under poverty, oppression, domestic violence, and discrimination that were practiced in very harsh ways in the south under Jim Crow laws.

1. Describe the emotional, energetic and physical demands of the rehearsal process on the students, as well on the adult leaders.
2. During the rehearsal process, theatre artists develop personal processes and skills to portray a character’s emotions with depth. Choose one of the following quotations; discuss the actor’s process.

Mitchell: “Theatre is not instant. You do have to ask them to dig deeper.”

Mitchell: “As a director I walk a tightrope. I’m trying to get their best without tearing them to pieces. “

Student: “Mr. Mitchell gives us a thick soul and a thin skin so that we can be affected by what we’re doing but still be able to withstand it.”

Mekai: “It was important to show that [the character of] Mister was not evil. He’s been hurt....and that’s what I see in my family—hurt people who have to try harder to get love.....” To develop the character, “I drew on the missing father-figure in my own life.”

3. Theatre is an intensely collaborative enterprise. All participants strive to interpret and convey the meaning of the text to an audience. The documentary shows primarily the process

of the actors, singers and dancers. We also hear from two of the student costume-makers and observe the student orchestra and stage crew. There are MANY people who have contributed to the vision or the details beyond the performers. Below is a list of creative people who work behind the scenes. Imagine YOURSELF in one of these roles. Which role interests you the most?

Director—selects script, interprets the themes and characters. Prepares an overall vision. Stages the production; works with design team and performers to realize vision.

Musical Director--interprets musical score. Leads song rehearsals. Helps singers to maximize their vocal instrument and to communicate the emotions of their characters through song.

Conductor--interprets musical score, arranges the music as needed, rehearses the orchestra and singers.

Choreographer—creates dance and movement at the level of the skill of the performers. Designs movements that advance the story, the mood, the tempo, the music.

Costume Designer—designs costumes suitable for each character and context; coordinates with set designer. Works with a team of seamstresses, tailors, wigmakers, etc.

Set Designer—Analyzes and interprets the script's settings and contexts. Plans how the set will look from the audience and how it is to be built by the crew. Works with carpenters and scene painters.

Lighting Design—Works closely with set and costume designers. Creates light plan for interior and exterior scenes that reflect time, place, mood, etc. Works with light tech crew to hang the lighting equipment and run the light board.

Sound Design—selects and manages sound equipment to amplify words and song. Creates/records any taped musical or sound cues within the script.

Stage Manager—Before the performance, the SM helps the director with details and keeps track of the staging. During performance, SM trains back-stage crew and cues all personnel, including sound/light board operators.

4. The dancers had to rehearse their steps and routines over and over and over again until they all danced in perfect unison, with flare and energy. If YOU were one of those dancers, what would you be feeling during the rehearsal process?

5. One of the actresses was accidentally injured during a scene with a staged slap or punch. In the movies, "stunt personnel" do most of the dangerous scenes. But on the stage, the actors have to do it themselves. Fighting is staged very carefully in order to keep the actors safe. In this case, what do you think went wrong?

6. What additional personal, social and life-skills are developed during the rehearsal process?

❖ **The Final Technical Rehearsals, Dress Rehearsals, Previews: Pulling it all Together**

One or more technical rehearsal is required before any production is ready for an audience. The purpose of the technical rehearsals is to ensure the functionality of the lighting, scenery, props, costumes, etc. Tech rehearsals are usually in full costume and makeup. These rehearsals are VERY long and can be VERY tedious as the stage action has to stop and start many times so the crew can get it right. The final technical rehearsals are “Previewed” to an invited audience.

1. What do you remember about the technical rehearsal? Perhaps you remember Corey furiously and dramatically typing notes into his laptop. Were the dress rehearsals going very well? What notes did he give the cast and crew?

❖ **Opening Night Jitters and Pep Talk**

After the performers warm-up vocally and physically, they form a circle and the director provides a “pep talk.” What are the purposes of this pre-show meeting? In athletics, what is equivalent of this “circle”?

THE NATIONAL THESPIAN CONFERENCE, Lincoln Nebraska: CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN:

1. Define “Thespians.” What is the origin of the word?. What is the mission of the International Thespian Society? <https://www.schooltheatre.org/internationalthespiansociety/home>

2. It was HUGE honor or NW School of the Arts to be invited to perform along with 10 others schools at the National Thespian Conference. But for the students to be able to perform, each student had to individually raise \$400 and the team (students, teachers, and parents) had to raise an additional \$130,000 to transport the large cast and crew plus all their gear (props, scenery, costumes, etc) from North Carolina to Nebraska. How did they raise the funds?

3. High school athletes attend many “away games” during their sports season. The cost of moving student athletes, coaches and gear is fully funded by the school district’s budget and/or by earnings from parent-run sports booster clubs. That is NOT the case for most non-athletic school programs. Why do you think there is unequal allocation of district revenue to athletes compared to artists?

4. Participation at the Thespian Conference was both an honor and a peak experience. For some, it was transformative and life-changing . Summarize or evaluate the impact of their presence at the tournament on the issue of racism.

“We get to Nebraska and everyone’s heads are turning...”

“When we arrived, the population of Black people doubled.”

“We proved all the stereotypes of Black teens wrong. We shut that down.”

THE HERO’S JOURNEY:

1. The View From the Top: How did the students change from beginning to end of the film? Did you witness personal or professional growth? Discuss the impacts of this pinnacle experience.

- Opportunities for post-secondary education and career training
- Development of 21st Century workplace skills
- Personal growth
- Artistic growth

2. Nebraska was a pinnacle experience for the students, but it was also a peak achievement for their teachers, especially Corey Mitchell. Did you notice how Mitchell worked with students in order to guide their processes of personal and professional transformation? What were his instructional strategies? What do you think he may have learned from this particular “Norman Conquest” experience?

3. Looking Back: The footage for this film was shot in 2012 so the graduating seniors in the film are now 5 years beyond the NW experience. Danielle 5 years later : “It [the film] shows how arts education (changed) our lives. The opportunity to experience theater in middle and high school shaped who we are. I wouldn’t be able to step back five years later and be myself without that, because the arts train us to be human beings.”

KEY CONCEPTS: What does the film’s director want us to understand about these important key concepts?

- | | |
|------------------|------------------------|
| * Dreams | *Friendship and Family |
| * Resilience | *Taking Charge |
| * Commitment | *Trust |
| * ‘Digging Deep’ | * (add others) |

FILMMAKERS PURPOSES:

1. Who are the intended audiences of this documentary film?

Certainly, the film is written for theatre educators and for students who aspire to careers in the performing arts because this film documents that journey. It also celebrates any person who overcomes adversity, who grasps opportunities, and who digs deeply enough to complete the transformative process required to ultimately “shine in the light.”

But the film has another intended audience. Here’s a hint: As Mitchell received his special Tony award for “Excellence in Theatre Education” and proudly raised the trophy high, he defiantly exclaimed, “Theatre Education Matters, Art Matters!” What did he mean by these words? To whom were these words addressed?

2. Why did the filmmaker create this documentary? What change would she like to see in the world?

3. The following link is to an article that chronicles the Filmmaker’s journey. Very informative about Hock’s process of making and marketing this documentary.

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/entertainment/arts-culture/article142858614.html>

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN THEATER EDUCATION: Transform your life! In addition to plays and musicals being performed at your high school or middle school, consider taking theatre education classes or joining a community theatre group. Here is a short list of nearby theatre education opportunities for middle and high school:

KidsStage—Everett

<http://www.villagetheatre.org/everett/kidstage-everett.php>

Jansen Center for the Arts, Lynden—Musical Theatre classes

<https://www.jansenartcenter.org/events/the-well-2/>

Bellingham Arts Academy For Youth (BAAY), classes and performances

<http://www.baay.org>

WWU’s Summer Youth Theatre Institute

<https://cfpa.wvu.edu/theatredance/summer-youth-theatre-institute>

Circus Arts Play Shop, Bellingham

<http://bellinghamcircusguild.com/classes/>

Missoula Children’s Theatre summer theatre camps at Mount Baker Theatre

<http://www.mountbaketheatre.com/mct/>

ARTS ADVOCACY

“The Shared Power of Film,” a Ted Talk by Beebee Kidron

Movies have the power to create a shared narrative experience and to shape memories and worldviews. British film director Beebee Kidron invokes iconic film scenes — from *Miracle in Milan* to *Boyz n the Hood* — as she shows how her group FILMCLUB shares great films with kids. 15 minutes.

https://www.ted.com/playlists/66/the_power_of_film

“Why the Live Arts Matter,” a Ted Talk by Ben Cameron

How can the magic of live theater, live music, live dance compete with the always-on Internet? Ben Cameron offers a bold look forward to a world where live arts matter more than ever — to link humans together at a primal level of shared experience. 15 min.

https://www.ted.com/playlists/393/talks_for_theater_geeks

TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN WASHINGTON STATE: Do any public school systems in Washington offer special “magnet” or “charter” schools for students in the arts or in other fields?

To get started, check out school-choice offerings in these large, public districts. How are students selected? What is the vision/mission/purpose of each specialized program? What metric is being used to measure the success of their students?

- Vancouver School District: From the link below, explore “Learning” for a list of their special programs
- <http://vansd.org/mission/>
- Seattle School District
- <https://www.seattleschools.org/directory/schools>

CURRENT ISSUES IN EDUCATION: What are the priorities of Betsy DeVos, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education? Does she take a position on Arts Education? On school choice? If she were the Superintendent of Washington’s schools, would she promote or defund our public school-choice offerings? DeVos is a controversial figure and much has been written about her educational agenda. Dig deeply before you formulate your position. Then defend your position with evidence.

<https://www.ed.gov>

BACKGROUND SOURCE MATERIAL: The Color Purple

The principle source material of the musical production performed by the students in this documentary is the novel, *The Color Purple*, written in 1982 by African-American author, Alice Walker. In 1983, her novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction. The novel was later adapted into a film (1985) and then a Broadway musical (2005, 2015).

Walker’s story takes place in rural Georgia and focuses on the lives of African-American women as they faced discrimination, poverty, and violence. Due to the novel’s explicit content, especially domestic violence, the novel has been the frequent target of censors and

appears on the [American Library Association](#) list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 2000–2009.

The story spans the years 1909-49. It is about the life of Celie, a 14-year-old Southern black woman, who was virtually sold into a life of servitude to a brutal husband, Albert. Celie pours out her innermost thoughts in letter form to her sister, Nettie, but Albert has been hiding the letters Nettie writes back, allowing Celie to assume that Nettie is dead. Finally, Celie finds a champion in the don't-take-no-guff Sofia, the wife of Albert's son from a previous marriage. Alas, Sofia is "humbled" when she is beaten into submission by angry whites. Later, Celie is able to forge a strong friendship with Albert's mistress, Shug. Emboldened by this, Celie begins rifling through her husband's belongings and finds Nettie's letters. At last able to stand up to her husband, Celie leaves him to search for a new life on her own.

For further plot details, see Spark Notes: <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/purple/summary.html>

LITERARY ANALYSIS: Due to mature themes, for High School Students only

Read the original novel by Walker. Identify author's purpose, key themes, character development, plot structure, use of literary devices such as symbolism, and how the novel exemplifies social, political and economic issues.

What are the Jim Crow Laws? What was their distribution pattern? What were their impacts? What is the relationship of Jim Crow to the rise of Alt-Right organizations?

The novel's popularity continues to this day. Why do you think that it still resonates today? Formulate your research questions and dig deeply.

Compare and contrast Walker's original work with its adaptations. Which of the adaptations (film script or musical script/score) best exemplifies the central vision of Walker's original novel. Explain significant similarities and differences.

In Walker's novel, what is the meaning of the title, "The Color Purple"?

Compare and contrast the characters in the novel to the real people at the NW Academy of the Arts who are performing those roles. Are there any parallels?

What adversity did Alice Walker personally overcome in order to achieve excellence as a writer?

Why was the novel controversial? Why was it on a list of banned books from 2000-2009?