

WICKED

reviewed by Jay Reynolds Freeman

On June 28, 2003, I and a friend attended very nearly the last San Francisco performance of the stage musical, "Wicked". It reopens on Broadway in autumn. I suspect it will be very successful. I encourage you to see it.

Fantasy can address problems that loom larger than individual lives, via characters with abilities that most of us lack. A world where liberty is on the decline, a world collapsing unrealized into totalitarianism, is a problem normally addressed -- if at all -- by mass movement, popular uprising, revolution, and war. Such events transcend human scale, and are not easily brought home in fiction or dramatic art. Better to tell of some brave, determined soul, who opposes the evil single-handedly, and thus present things on a scale we can comprehend and identify with. Yet how can a hero oppose an entire government, with its armies and spies and technology?

Magic helps. "Wicked" describes the coming of age of a starry-eyed youth, whose attitude toward the establishment changes by degree from idealism, to suspicion, to dawning realization of real horror, and ultimately to open revolt. Though the magic here is not all-powerful, this individual is enormously talented and well trained in its use, and thereby might just maybe have a chance.

Only, there can be no hope. We know the story far too well to admit such a possibility. We have visited this enchanted realm many a time, and met the inhabitants. We understand how the tale must finally end. For this magical land is the Oz of L. Frank Baum, and the hero is the character whom we have all known and feared as the Wicked Witch of the West.

Yet "Wicked" is not parody or rewrite. The play is carefully crafted, and utterly true to the original works. This is the real Oz, and these are the real characters, both from the classic books and from the celebrated movie featuring Judy Garland, playing the same story, that we have all known from childhood. The point of view is entirely plausible, but has gone unsuspected for nearly a hundred years.

"Wicked" deals with the classic Ozian themes. It's about courage, which the protagonist lacks and needs -- it's hard on a young woman, growing up green. (Her name is "Elphaba", by the way, a play on the name "L. Frank Baum".) It's about heart, and her blonde, gorgeous, self-centered, stereotypically ditzy, school roommate lacks not only

that quality but also most other aspects of emotional depth. The strengths and weaknesses of these two characters complement each other -- it is not surprising that they ultimately become best friends and co-conspirators. (Do I have to tell you that the roommate's name is "Glinda"?) It's about brains, about needing to figure out just what is going on in the world, and just what to do about it. And of course, it is also about knowing what is wrong, and taking steps to set it right.

Furthermore, it is about politics. The original "Wizard of Oz" was an unappreciated pungent commentary about America at the beginning of the twentieth century; "Wicked" is equally incisive a hundred years later. I won't give it away, but what is going on in Oz is brilliant allegory for deprivation of civil liberties, at the level of what is most hallowed in the U. S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

The sets are wonderful. My favorite single piece was the great disembodied head in the Wizard's palace. It is enormous, metallic, and its jaw moves in lip synch as a deep, distorted voice bellows "I AM OZ, THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE". Later, there is a scene behind the head, and the back view of this apparatus is just what L. Frank Baum must have imagined as a high-tech, nineteen-ought-something talking head, with plumbing, gears, and a French horn.

The familiarity of the Oz tale provides numerous opportunities for self-reference. Before Elphaba and Glinda have become friends, the latter is trying to foist off an unwanted garment upon the former. It's one of those things that some tasteless relative has given you, that you seek to lose for fear you might actually have to wear it, a pointy black hat with a wide brim. Glinda hands it to her roommate with some remark about how it's high fashion, and she should put it on. Elphaba is not a fashion plate, but she is no fool. She holds the offending chapeau at arm's length between finger and thumb, cocks an eye toward it, and drops it on the floor with the cynical remark, "When monkeys fly!" And presently, they do.

Even the minor characters are there, but they, too, are not quite what we are used to. Elphaba and friends rescue a young animal from a biological lab where something terrible was going to be done to it. The rescue is successful, but the little creature is so frightened by all the action that for the rest of its life it is unnaturally cowardly ... particularly for a lion.

The music is spectacular. My favorite number is the vocally and physically soaring "Defying Gravity" (and not just gravity), sung by Elphaba as she accomplishes a levitation spell to escape from the forces she has chosen to oppose. "Popular", sung by Glinda, is almost equally

good, as is the sad and cynical "No Good Deed Goes Unpunished".

What a marvelous achievement, to transform an American nightmare into an American hero. The Wicked Witch of the West is the archetype of the ugly, evil sorceress; she has haunted the dreams, lurked in the dark closets, and cackled under the beds of American children for almost a century. Suddenly, she is someone who might more likely protect the same children from true evil, and it looks as if she always was. The best definition of magic that I have ever heard is "the art of achieving change in the perception of reality", and "Wicked" is in that sense truly magical, and in more ways than one. I am never going to be able to think of the Oz tales the same way again.

"Wicked" is based on the rather darker novel of the same name, by Gregory Maguire, with score and screenplay by Stephen Schwartz and Winnie Holzman, respectively. Glinda and Elphaba are played by Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel.

We need more fairy tales like this one.