



ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURE THEATER

# Follow the road — yellow brick or other — to Paramount’s wondrous ‘Wizard of Oz’

By Catey Sullivan - For the Sun-Times | Dec 3, 2018, 1:13pm CDT

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It's been almost 120 years since L. Frank Baum penned "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," the first and best-known of his 15 "Oz" books. A Chicagoan when he began the children's novel in 1899, Baum created a story of a Kansas farm girl and her fantastical adventures over the rainbow that became forever ingrained in pop culture with the 1939 musical movie version.

'The Wizard of Oz' ★★½ When: Through Jan. 6, 2019 Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora Tickets: \$36-\$69 Info: ParamountAurora.com

In shaping the musical "Wizard of Oz" for Aurora's massive Paramount Theatre, director/choreographer Amber Mak and music director Kory Danielson go for broke. Between the cyclone and the Emerald City and the battalion of flying monkey/cow/cyclist puppets, it's pretty clear that the Paramount's special-effects budget could probably rival those of the classic film.

On stage, "Oz" unfurls as a hybrid of live theater and cinematic projections that will have the squirmiest toddlers wonderstruck. Backed by Danielson's 14-person orchestra, the ensemble makes composer/lyricists Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg's score ("Over the Rainbow," "Ding, Dong! The Witch is Dead," and "We're Off to See the Wizard" among its pages) sound lush and new.



You know you're in good hands early: "Over the Rainbow" is the first tune up, and as Dorothy, Elizabeth Stenholt obviously has mighty shoes to fill (it is impossible to hear the song without thinking of Judy Garland). Stenholt makes it her own, with a melodic yearning that is somehow equal parts intimacy and grandeur.



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Caron Buinis stars plays the Wicked Witch of the West, Harriet Nzinga Plumpp portrays Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, and Elizabeth Stenholt plays Dorothy in Paramount Theatre's 2018 production of "The Wizard of Oz." | Liz Lauren [Read More](#)

Set designers Kevin Depinet and Christopher Rhoton's whirling structures move with speed and ease from desolate prairie to gleaming fantasy land. Greg Hofmann's Vegas-glittery lighting morphs from sunshine to cyclone in a twinkling. Theresa Ham's trippy costumes capture the different worlds of Kansas, Munchkinland and Emerald City. Projection designer Kevin Loney sends cows, cyclists and twisters soaring over the stage. Puppet designer Jesse Mooney-Bullock's whimsical creations are marvels, from the eyelashes on the apple-throwing trees to the spidery appendages of the spellbinding jitterbugs.

Amid all that, the cast stands out. Farmhands Hunk (Kyle Adams), Hickory (Carl Draper) and Zeke (Paul-Jordan Jansen) are double-cast as the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion, respectively. Mak's attention to detail is noteworthy: Hunk hauls a lanky, floppy scarecrow around in the farm scenes; Hickory fiddles with a metal funnel; Zeke sports epic facial hair and a nervous disposition. When the farmhands transform, their key characteristics become enlarged. Adams' Scarecrow is kind, caring and smart. Draper's Tin Man is a walking, talking valentine. As for Jansen, he brings me to a sentence I never thought I'd utter: This Lion is on a par with that of the late, great Bert Lahr.

Which brings me to my primary point of contention. Unforgivably, the Lion's best number – "Courage" – is missing. Jansen could sing the stuffing out of the number, wherein the Lion ponders questions for the ages such as "What makes the muskrat guard his musk?" and "What puts the 'ape' in the 'apricot'?" If you've got a Lion worthy of Bert Lahr, for the love of everything ferocious, let him roar in full.

Still, if you aren't an Ozophile, you probably won't realize what's missing. And as sure as thunder in the Dust Bowl, there's plenty to love in what remains.

As the Wizard (and Kansas's Professor Marvelous), Gene Weygandt continues his roughly decade-long off-again/on-again relationship with the character he played in "Wicked" for years, hitting just the correct balance of chicanery and chivalry. Harriet Nzinga Plumpp is all radiant benevolence as Glinda the Good Witch, and believably care-worn as Auntie Em. Caron Buinis' Almira Gulch/Wicked Witch of the West is more magnificently shady ("You billowing bale of bovine fodder!") than the haunted forest.

Whether this is your first trip to Oz or your 100th, it's a magical place at the Paramount. If only someone would write a backstory for Miss Gulch.

*Catey Sullivan is a local freelance writer.*

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Dorothy (Elizabeth Stenholt) gets whisked over the rainbow by a Kansas cyclone in Paramount Theatre's "The Wizard of Oz." | Liz Lauren

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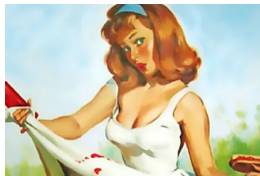
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