

theRep (Capital Repertory Theatre), Albany, NY

The Wizard of Oz, by L. Frank Baum; Music by Harold Arlen; Lyrics by E. Y. Harburg.

Background music by Herbert Stothart; Book Adaptation by John Kane;

Directed by Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Follow the Yellow Brick Road.”

What’s the last film you’d expect to see, full out, as a stage musical? I would lay even odds that your choice would be “The Wizard of Oz.” It is such a perfect movie: Judy Garland, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, Margaret Hamilton, Frank Morgan, Jack Haley, seemingly actual Munchkins. How could it be better? Well, theRep in Albany, New York is setting out to make it so, to take the challenge, to contest the best. Director Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill has taken it on herself to try and make us forget what we have loved all of our lives and find an awesome new Oz, a new Toto, a new Dorothy and friends. In the Emerald City she and her designers have created on its wide stage in her new theater, she has brought classic characters alive in the hands, voices, faces and interpretive skills of talented people. It’s not perfect but who cares! It’s Oz.



Conor DeVoe, Adia Bell, David Girard, Kyle Garvin, Taylor Hilt Mitchell;

Photo: Douglas Liebig

This stage version follows the movie script scrupulously. If you know the film you can say the lines along with the actors. However this version brings back the song intros you’ve never heard before that Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg wrote and that alone gives the stage edition a sense of newness that is completely unexpected. It also brings back the one major musical number cut from the film, “The Jitterbug,” which proves to be one of the best things in the show. Choreographed by Freddy Ramirez it is something that will live in your memory for a long, long time. Ramirez has done glorious work realizing Mancinelli-Cahill’s vision throughout the show. His six dancer/singers create remarkable people and creatures, Munchkins, Winkies, Poppies, a cyclone, denizens of the city, plants in the country, trees in the woods. They are Ariana Andretta, Gabrielle Bazinet Douglas, Joshua DeMarco, Alex Domini, Marco Puente, and Shannon Rafferty. I would have appreciated two more of them but these six are terrific.



Adia Bell sings “Over the Rainbow;
Photo: Douglas Liebig

Adia Bell is perfectly lovely as Dorothy Gale, the little girl whose adventures in the Land of Oz intrigue and entrance us. If we know the movie there are no surprises, except that this Dorothy plays the ukelele, sings her songs in a different tempo, and is more willful and deliberate than her predecessor. When she bids her friends farewell so that she can return to Kansas we feel her pain rather than just witness it. Bell plays Dorothy with sincerity and more charm than musical ability and she’s no slouch in that department either.

Her friends Lion (or Zeke), Tin Man (or Hickory), and Scarecrow (or Hunk) provide more than ample support for Bell’s Dorothy in both worlds, Oz and Kansas. Conor DeVoe is just fine as the man of metal. I could believe he had rusted when his joints stiffened.

Kyle Garvin was amusing as the Lion who roar is worse than his bite. The floppy Scarecrow was very well played by the loose-limbed Taylor Hilt Mitchell whose singing was stronger than his body parts.

Uncle Henry (and the Gatekeeper) was played by David Girard who is always welcome for his talent on stages anywhere, Auntie Em (and the good witch of the North, Glinda) was played by the very talented Barbara Howard who delivered well in both roles. Her singing Glinda was lovely. The Wizard was played with strength, humor and assurance by Kevin McGuire who, it seems, cannot do anything wrong, ever. Rarely did this group of actors imitate the actors who came before them at M-G-M in 1939.

The big surprise was the cackling wicked witch, a.k.a. Miss Elmira Gulch. Throughout the show she was a disturbing presence, which was perfect, but when her evil plotting got her the top musical spot in the restored “Jitterbug,” she emerged a nearly operatic virago who also (*surprise!*) played the violin. Ms. Katie Fay Francis undertook bringing a whole new witch to the mix and there remained nothing of Miss Hamilton who originated the role.



Katie Fay Francis, Halo the Dog, David Girard, Adia Bell;
Photo: Douglas Liebig

A show like this one requires a very talented crew of visionaries and this show certainly

had that going for it. Projection Designer Nathan W. Scheuer outdid himself with his dreary Kansas landscape, his field of poppies, his Emerald City, and in fact every glorious look on the stage. His views were supplemented with wonderful physical sets designed by Frank I. Oliva. The “reminiscent” costumes designed by Howard Tsvi Kaplan kept us aware of the 1939 film version and the lighting design by Rob Denton held it all together. Jeffrey Salerno’s sound design was just what the production needed. The musical arrangements by Harry Lumb and Josh D. Smith kept music director Eric Svejcar and his six-person ensemble very busy indeed.

This holiday show, playing for a month, is a treat of unusual proportions, unfaultable style and infectious delights. Around the theater, I found mine in the men’s room, are Emerald Green warnings about the show that include preparation for noise, outsize visuals and fantasy characters (a first for me). They are in keeping with this transformation of a perfect film to a fine play. They embody the sly wit of author L. Frank Baum who created all of this one hundred and twenty-two years ago. I think he’d enjoy this show as much as I did.

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The Wizard of Oz plays at theRep (Capital Repertory Theatre) at 251 North Pearl Street, Albany, NY through December 24. For information and tickets go to their website at www.capitalrep.org or contact Proctors at 518.346.6204 or info@proctors.org