

The Wizard of Oz

By Peter Keough

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The terror instilled in me as a child by repeated viewings of “The Wizard of Oz,” I now realize, drove me to become a film critic.

Every holiday season the film would be broadcast on television, and with the rest of the family I would be obliged to watch. Was I the only one who had nightmares about twisters languidly, inexorably lolling across the Kansas grayness, the phallic funnels looming over the womblike shelter of the storm cellar, shut tight to Dorothy’s beseeching? The macabre spectacle of the wicked Witch of the East’s feet, robbed of their Ruby Slippers, shriveling up under Dorothy’s house? Or the Winged Monkeys, their formations filling the sky like a cross between Goya’s “Sleep of Reason” and the Luftwaffe, off to their hideous dismemberment of the Scarecrow? Or the appalling realization that one’s entire experience, in living color yet (though in its earliest TV broadcasts, in even eerier black and white), might be no more than a dream? These were things, like sex and death (“Goldfinger” and “Bambi” did the job for those two), that no one spoke about. Year after year I watched, the terrors unspoken, until the ritual of the film reviewing would sublimate them.

Years later, my fate as a critic sealed, I returned to “Oz” to see what all the fuss was about. Released in a newly restored version, the film was being shown in a large theater filled with an audience consisting mostly of hundreds of prepubescent girls dressed in Dorothy’s blue gingham dress. It was the first time I saw it, as they say, the way it was meant to be seen, on a big screen and in a big dark hall with hundreds of strangers. Would “Oz,” like the genial shaman of the title, prove a humbug? Would it disperse into smoke and mirrors and, with it, the whole artifice of movies which I revered?

The artifice proved shaky all right, but it wasn’t “Oz”’s fault. Because of some projector problem we had to be content with a postage-stamp image on the big screen that was about the same size as that on a large TV in a sports bar. So much for six decades of technological development. And the preteen audience seemed more respectful than awed. No crying, squealing, or laughter, a few clap-alongs with the tunes (“Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead” a particular crowd pleaser), and only polite applause when the Wicked Witch was melted.

Gradually, though, the magic, long gone beyond kitsch to archetype by ceaseless repetition and cultural recycling, drew me in, but the innocence of my childhood responses had darkened the rueful experience. The cyclone no longer got a rise out of me, but the grey wastes of Kansas, as bleak as the Oklahoma Dustbowl in John Ford’s “The Grapes of Wrath” released in 1940, the following year, seemed horrifying enough. Against that backdrop, surrounded by the dilapidated barnyard, Dorothy’s rendition of

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow” echoes over the years as a stinging reproach to false optimism and lost illusions. The miracle of Judy Garland’s performance lies in her utter lack, not only of makeup and superficial beauty, but of irony. And, of course, the homespun, limpid beauty would slowly be laid to waste in the tragedy that was Garland’s life.

But her Dorothy lives on, an icon free to be picked apart by fans and critics, such as myself, desperate to retrieve her wonder. When amazement fails, there’s always analysis, and few films are as rife with archetypal resonance and historical, cultural and personal reverberations as “Oz.” Some essay questions for discussion: How does Dorothy’s quest with her three needy, dysfunctional friends relate to current pop-psychological issues of empowerment and passive aggression? Is the film a Freudian, feminist, or Marxist allegory? Is the man behind the curtain a metaphor for the dubious magic of the motion picture industry itself?

Well, so be it. The key to growing up, as Dorothy real-



Poster from 1949 re-issue of the film.
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ized, is discovering that one's fears and desires are mostly special effects and hokum, and resigning oneself to the fact that, except for an inconsequential sojourn for a couple of hours to a gaudy two-dimensional somewhere over the rainbow, there is indeed no place like home, the humdrum monochrome of the familiar, oppressive, and hopeless that one returns to after the flickering illusion is over.

That home, Dorothy's Kansas, is ruled over by the tyrannical local landowner Almira Gulch (the oddly sexy Margaret Hamilton, later to sell us Maxwell House coffee), a barren matriarchy (that Auntie Em is a cold-blooded taskmaster, despite her crullers) served by bumbling, ineffectual males (I still laugh at Uncle Henry's line, "Oh, she big her dog, eh?") The scenario is ripe for revolution, but when sole spirit of male rebellion, Toto, asserts himself, Gulch sentences him to death. This summons the fertilizing male principle — the inevitable cyclone — that propels Dorothy, home and all, into a realm of endless possibility, where the conflict between independence and conformity can be resolved through kitschy fantasy and some catchy production numbers.

Oz, though, is merely Kansas transformed through Dorothy's polymorphously perverse wish fulfillment (she is, after all, the sixteen-year-old Judy Garland) and early Technicolor. In this Utopia, she has slain the mother-oppressor, the Witch of the East, usurped that tyrant's power in the form of the Freudianly ripe ruby footwear (with the intervention of dotty Billie Burke's oddly detached Good Witch of the North), but still requires patriarchal assistance to defeat the vengeful Wicked Witch of the West (Hamilton, again, seductive in green).

That includes the three Kansas farmhands metamorphosed into types of their own inadequacy. The Scarecrow, played with rubber-limbed grace and guileless guile by Ray Bolger ("I think I'll miss you most of all," says Dorothy, and she may be right) is a stuffed man who wants brains who is nonetheless the brains of the outfit. The Tin Man, played by the gently melancholy Jack Haley, is a hollow man who bemoans his heartlessness, though his crying often threatens to rust him into immobility. And the Cowardly Lion, played by Bert Lahr, the only actor who could get away with rhyming "rhinoceros" with "imposseros!" is a mincing bully who wears a suffocating ninety-pound costume that doesn't conceal the "dandyion" terrified within. While these three hide their potency behind the guise of debility, the goal of their quest, the Wizard himself (Frank Morgan, in one of five roles — think of how the film would have played if the dyspeptic W. C. Fields had not held out for more money

for the part) veils his powerlessness under the veil of omnipotence.

Or is it powerlessness? Of all the images in "Oz," that of the disembodied bulbous head crossed by fire and brimstone still disturbs. When he is exposed by the indefatigable Toto, the Wizard reveals the ultimate Hollywood secret: that the reality doesn't matter as much as the image, that illusion is as honest as truth if believed in, if only for 101 minutes of screen time.

To create the illusion that is "The Wizard of Oz," many labored behind that curtain, beginning L. Frank Baum, who wrote the book in 1900, and including four directors (Richard Thorpe, Victor Fleming, George Cukor, and King Vidor), ten screenwriters, and hundreds of actors, musicians, craftsmen, and dwarves. Perhaps the most wonderful thing about "Oz" was that it got made at all, a process of creative cooperation and chaos motivated by vanity, greed, and longing into the most enduring figment of our pop-culture pantheon. The doubts of former frightened children aside, it remains as profound an epic as "The Odyssey" and "The Inferno," as intimate as a girl waking from a dream.

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