Ease On Down the Road to The Wiz

By Leigh J. Posmaa

Forty years ago a young Kansas girl, a scarecrow, a tin man, and a lion took us on a fantasy down a yellow brick road. They were seeking a way home for the lost girl, a brain for the scarecrow, a heart for the tin man, and courage for the lion. The way they instead discovered the power in believing and the indomitable love between friends and family, creating The Wizard of Oz, one of the most beloved fairy tales of all time. Since 1939 young and old alike have been charmed by its timeless themes, the delightful score, and the wonderful characterizations.

Who can forget Judy Garland as Dorothy, her poignant singing of the Oscar-winning "Over the Rainbow," or Jack Haley's Tin Man, Ray Bolger's Scarecrow, or Bert Lahr's Cowardly Lion. Forty years later the fairy tale returns to the silver screen in a funny, charming, re-creation entitled simply, yet hiply, The Wiz.

For the movie, the span of five years since the Broadway play opened has wrought changes that overshadowed the alterations that followed the 35-year break between the play and the original movie. Nevertheless, The Wiz of 1978 still packs sentiment and joy to rival the original Wizard of Oz. The Wiz of 1978 takes place (and was shot) in New York City. Dorothy of 1978 is an elementary school teacher, played by singer Diana Ross; like the Dorothy of 1939 she too lacks self-confidence and is uncertain of her bonds to her family. She is swept to the Land of Oz by a snowstorm to re-create the experiences and lessons of The Wizard of Oz.

Changing Dorothy's hometown to New York provided set and costume designer Tony Watson with a tremendous challenge yet endless opportunity for creativity. Watson, whose credits include the costumes for Mary Poppins and the sets for Pippin (literally took on the city of New York. Muchkin Land was shot outdoors at the New York State Pavilion, home of the 1964 World's Fair. For the Yellow Brick Road, Watson created a yellow vinyl strip for Dorothy and friends. And when the winged crown poked the Cyclone (rolloater) costume for the Emerald City, home of the Wiz.

Dorothy was a move in the wrong direction. Making Dorothy a perturbed elementary school teacher precluded by the disparity in age. The Wiz has, however, put together a phenomenal collection of talent—in its actors, singers, dancers, costume designers, set designers, orchestrator, musicians, and supporting cast for a colorful, exciting, warm, and memorable re-creation of the classic The Wizard of Oz.

...the fairy tale returns to the silver screen in a funny, charming, re-creation entitled simply, yet hiply, The Wiz...