

Back in the Land of Oz (The Success of Wicked)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

After initially watching the classic musical The Wizard of Oz (1) as a film studies student, I recently took an interest in exploring the box office success of the more recent film adaptation of the stage musical Wicked (2) which came close to hitting the billion dollar mark since its release in theatres in the fall of 2024. While the original was celebrated in its former age for its use of vibrant Technicolor and never-seen-before studio special effects, the futuristic prequel, conceived some 85 years later, was able to appeal to the critical eye of younger generations, raised in an age of seamless computer-generated realms and elaborate animation technology blending fantasy and realism.

While trying to tie in with the original narrative of a young Dorothy travelling to Emerald City with her dog Toto and a familiar trio of friends, Wicked tells the earlier story of Elphaba Thropp, a young woman with special powers who is scorned simply for the green colour of her skin. While Elphaba is initially included at Shiz University by a mysterious faculty member specializing in sorcery, her dreams of finally fitting in with others are dashed after a fairy tale visit to see the Wizard of Oz turns her toward a negative force of magic. Elphaba soon is forced into becoming 'wicked' when the Ozian world begins to demonize her and when her prissy Shiz roommate Galinda eventually sides against her under the prevailing pressures of conformity and a new order of exclusion and ostracism.

Feeling pleased that the older and slightly outdated musical numbers of the original like "Follow the Yellow Brick Road" and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" were replaced with more contemporary meticulously choreographed performances like "Popular" and "Defying Gravity", I found myself wondering how much the audience responses in 1939 differed from the sing-along crowd atmosphere of 2024. While Wicked explores through song and dance how popularity and conformity can be quite shallow in a world that always needs a new threat or enemy, The Wizard of Oz's abstraction seems to tell a different musical tale harkening back to the uncertainty of the advent of World War II when the peaceful pastoral scenes of a farm in Kansas suddenly feel lost and out of reach amid the violent storms and sudden advances of Nazism.

1. The Wizard of Oz (1939). Dir. Victor Fleming. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. USA. 102 min.

2. Wicked (2024). Dir. John M. Chu. Universal Pictures. USA. 160 min.