

National Post Theatre Review: The Wizard of Oz

[Robert Cushman](#) Dec 5, 2011



Ross Petty's latest holiday extravaganza — or “wickedly wacky family musical” — is the best in several years. The good things start with the choice of material. *The Wizard of Oz* is a famous fairy tale, but one that has never been on pantomime's usual source list. Unlike, say, the tangle of Robin Hood stories, it has a solid structure that can be messed around while still standing up straight. The show gives official credit to L. Frank Baum's original story, but it also pays surreptitious homage to the Judy Garland movie, that being the version that everybody knows. In fact, it gets the

best of both worlds.

Speaking of worlds: in this incarnation we aren't in Kansas anymore, even at the start. This script, "adapted" by Lorna Wright and Nicholas Hune-Brown, gives us a skateboarding Dorothy from present-day Toronto, a self-possessed teen clearly unfazeable by witches or wizards, not to mention lions or tigers or bears. The urban landscape she inhabits, neatly depicted or projected by designers Beth Kates and Ben Chaisson, comes complete with streetcars that pass in the background with implausible frequency. I could happily have spent more time there. Plot requires though that we get speedily whirlwinded off to an Oz that takes its name seriously, being populated by Aussies, a gyrating gesticulating crew of outback yokels, whom the Wicked Witch of the West dismisses, not too unjustly, as a bunch of ethnic stereotypes.

Some things are familiar: Dorothy still has her dog, who is granted an endearing amount of stage time. Others have changed: She now also has a love interest in the shape of the Tin Man, though, for reasons best not gone into, he isn't a tin man when they meet. Although he does feel in need of a heart, which is where she comes in.

The Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion remain much as we have always known them, except they are already buddies (and mutual protectors) rather than picking one another up on the yellow brick road. The writers do a good job of reconciling the old with the new, though they run out of steam toward the end, when they seem to be trying simultaneously to cut the story down and to spin it out.

This apart, Tracey Flye's direction keeps things moving briskly and imaginatively, with a nice degree of self-mockery. A curiosity is that, though she's best known as a choreographer, she didn't do the dances here; they're the work of Marc Kimelman, and they're excellent: not exactly innovative, but bright and funny and generally superior to the routines in some recent musicals with

glossier credentials.

The show's greatest asset, though, is its cast, which is crammed with some of the city's best musical comedians. A funkier, spunkier, less cloying Cinderella — sorry, Dorothy — than Elicia Mackenzie could hardly be imagined; or a more charmingly metallic Romeo than Yvan Pedneault, who sings strong and acts shy; while his buddies, all Antipodean miners, sing about being macho men, he keeps a psychological distance.

Kyle Blair is a winsome Scarecrow, and Steve Ross the most ideally suited Lion since Bert Lahr. Jessica Holmes plays a well-intentioned if absent-minded fairy named Splenda, who has a double function: in panto terms she's the traditional fairy godmother, setting the story up and keeping a benevolent eye on it; in the Oz universe, she's a delightfully lisping parody of the good witch Glinda, who was the one insufferable element of the classic MGM movie. She bridges both worlds by addressing the audience as her Munchkins, and getting away with it.

If anything, there is more talent on this stage than the show knows how to use. As the wizard, who always seems as much a fraud as a title character as he is a wizard, Eddie Glen has nothing to do in the first half and hardly anything in the second; his two big scenes are rolled into one and quickly disposed of but he's kept hanging around anyway. (He's good in the commercials, though. Petty pantos periodically stop in their tracks to lower a screen and pay tribute to the sponsors. Sometimes these spots are the best things in the evening. They certainly beat curtain speeches.)

In accordance with recent Petty tradition, we have not one but two man-crazy dames, who come near to cancelling one another out. As the Witch, there's the boss himself, having his usual good time taunting us for not hissing him loud enough, though I'm not sure his heart is still in it. As Dorothy's guardian Plumbum, by whom

Aunty Em would surely be scandalized, we have Dan Chameroy, also recycling; though as the kids, or at least those summoned on stage to be interrogated, always name her as their favourite character, I guess he's entitled.

The interpolated pop songs contribute to the fun feel, though they aren't likely to vex the ghosts of Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg, which may already be sufficiently vexed at having their film score padded out on the current London stage with additional numbers by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Meanwhile, in Toronto we have one other wrinkle they couldn't have anticipated. "Everyone's glad she took such a crowning," wrote Harburg of the grisly fate of the Wicked Witch of the East, "getting hit by a house is even worse than drowning." He never dreamed that, courtesy of Dame Plumbum, it would be an outhouse.

The Wizard of Oz runs until Jan. 6. For tickets, call 1-866-447-7849 or visit rosspetty.com.
