



'Wizard of Oz' features full, talented cast at Theatre in the Park

Bob Evans



Grab the family and load the kids up with an afternoon nap and take plenty of sugary treats to Theatre in the Park's production of "The Wizard of Oz" this weekend and next, but plan ahead because showtime is 8:30 and will end about 11.

The Kansas crowd-pleasing musical features a strong cast of local talent from the speaking roles through the youth ensembles. The show features costumes, makeup, wigs, and special effects to keep the younger attendees focused on all the action on the stage. The monkeys and the witch can be scary for the younger ones, but Dorothy, Glinda, and Dorothy's

four escorts (including Toto) keep the spirit lighter as they fend off evil and assist Dorothy with the witch.



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You all know the story, Dorothy goes over the rainbow to an enchanted land where witches and ruby slippers have magical powers, monkeys have wings, trees throw apples, and witches melt when you add water. It's pure escapism and family-friendly fun with some additional music and dancing thrown in.

The old 1939 movie really does not qualify as a standard musical because there is just not that much music. The movie has no big production numbers, nor does it feature a lot of dancing. The stage version has added more music, more characters, and more dance numbers. The result: a more spirited show that engages children more than the movie. The "Jitterbug" number stands out in this live action production.

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The Theatre in the Park production follows the story of the movie, so expect a re-telling of the story. The show suffers the same slow down in the second half, but just knowing the story so well, the audience remains engaged. Act II is just not as animated as Act I. That's a problem with the script, not the acting or this production.

As always, Tiffany Schweigert finds her strength in casting. Perfect casting makes "The Wizard of Oz" a real crowd-pleaser. Dorothy, Glinda, Scarecrow, and Lion have good, strong voices. Tinman has a good voice, but it is his dancing that makes him stand out. (In the film, the character does not dance, so that added aspect is surprising.)



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Schweigert did an amazing job with this monster of a show that features a large youth cast, well-known characters, flying witches and bicycles, and lots of technical abilities. The show works well, even with all the set pieces and changes. Credit is given to LB the choreographer who suggested the aerial tornado sequence. Amazing!

Probably the most stunning for the younger fans is the flying of the bicycle, the entrance/exits of Glinda, and the Flying Monkey. That aspect always pleases everyone. But the one really special addition for this production comes from aerial performance of the tornado. A performer climbs a material and performs aerial stunts like in a circus to create the tornado. The effect is shocking and beautifully executed. That alone adds a different texture to the story.

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The brains, brawn and talent of the Production team created this classic for Theatre in the Park and all deserve recognition for their creativity, dedication, and ideas. The Production Team is:

Tiffany Schweigert, Director; LB, Choreographer; Jeremiah Birts, Assistant Choreographer; James Levy, Musical Director/Conductor; Fran Kapon-Kuzila, Costume Designer; Em Loper, Props Designer; John Hollan, Hair and Make-up Designer; Doug Schroeder, Scenic Designer; Sai Rupp, Lighting Designer; Tyler Nissen, Lead Lighting Designer; John Prokop, Sound Designer; Josh Koan, Lead Sound Designer; April Kobetz, Stage Manager; Toi Hunt-Beechner, Asst. Stage Manager; Emilie Christian, Asst. Stage Manager; Julie Fox, Child Coordinator; Sarah Peterson, Child Coordinator.



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McKenna Neef presented a very good performance as Dorothy. She delivered a great vocal with "Over the Rainbow," and she carried the show. Without a good, strong stage presence from Dorothy, the show is dull. Not so with this version. Jennifer Weiman voiced a beautiful Glinda the Good Witch. She possesses a clear soprano range that made the character light to fit the theme. There should have been more opportunity for these two characters to sing.

Tom Nelson was the most animated of the escorts as the Scarecrow. Nelson's strong voice stands out and then his movements as the wobbly-kneed man of straw makes him a crowd favorite. David Thompson also has a strong voice, but his character focused more on his comedic delivery than his vocal talents. Thompson presented a child-friendly Lion with some fun, exaggerated

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movements. Jacob Jackson delivered a lively Tinman that could sing and dance and tap. What a difference to see the Tinman breakout into a tap sequence. Great delivery given to the usually rusty part.

And then, there is the Wicked Witch of the West in all her green glory, magic flying broomstick, and her arsenal of spells and wickedness. Jennifer Coville abandoned her normal musical-comedy background to play the epitome of evil—the Wicked Witch of the West. She was green, mean-spirited, hateful, and hilarious. In the first part as Alvira Gulch coming on her bicycle to snatch and destroy Toto, she made known her meanness went to her core. As the Wicked Witch, she attempted to carry out her threats, but now focused on destroying Dorothy. Each of her scenes brought laughs of appreciation from the audience. Coville has found a new level for this role. Great work.



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A special recognition needs to go to choreographer LB for great work getting that huge youth ensemble to move so well in time with the music. A large cast requires a lot of dedication and the dedication paid well. The young members were together, focused, and well-rehearsed. The adult members of the cast did even better. The show moved and the dancing was strong.

Costumes and props were bright and colorful, which is so necessary for "Oz." As a fantasy/dream colors and props are very important for the audience buy-in. Great work. The aerial specialty of the tornado will be remembered. What a great surprise and so well executed. Wow.

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The Wizard of Oz" cast is: McKenna Neef as Dorothy, Jennifer Weiman as Aunt Em/Glinda, Tom Nelson as Scarecrow, Jacob Jackson as Tinman, David Thompson as Cowardly Lion, Jennifer Coville-Schweigert as Wicked Witch of the West, Don Leonard as Professor/Wizard, David Stelting as Uncle Henry/Doorman, Brian Brewer as Munchkin Mayor/Winkie General, Josh McGhee as Munchkin Coroner/Winkie, Alex Grumminger as Jitterbug Lead, as Nikko/Crow, and Blair McCroskey as Toto.

Munchkins, Tots and Ensembles: (Tots) Ada Lillie Worthington, Amelia Coville-Schweigert, Brooke Jenkins (Munchkin Tough Guys) Jonah Cartwright, Liam Pfeifer, Liam Smith; (Monkey/Ensemble) Declan Franey, Louisa Bartlett, Jennie Quarrato, Ryan Russell, (Crows) Sam Wise, Jacob Wray, Jacob Thomas; (Male Ensemble) Hewleek McCoy, Matthew Santaularia; (Tree/Ensemble) Avereay Shaw, Maddie Brag. Kara Mason, McKenna Lewis, Amelia Clark, Nichole McCroskey; (Tree/Ensemble) Nicole McCroskey;



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CyloneDancer/Ensemble Lina Sattarin; (Women's ensemble) Grace Wallace, Maddie Bragg, Carrigan Rohach, Elaine Watson, Deanna Richard, Abby Peterson, Tajhuana Thorpe, Grace Taylor, Lauren Hoestje, Noel Smith; (Children's Ensemble) Kinsley Oliver, Kaitlyn Brewer, Lucille Dandurand, Liam Pheifer.

The orchestra is led by music director James Levy. Members of the orchestra are: Connor Ampleman, Kaytee Deitrich, Julia Edeal, Julian Garcia, Hannah Goldberg, Zac Kaiser, Jan Lord, Danielle Mays, Courtney McKown, Ron Mundt, Connor O'Brien, Jerry Old, Patrick Peters, Tim Quang,



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Caroline Shipley, Maria Steinacher, Catie Steinacher, Deana Wagoner, Emily Winterburg, Genevieve Wrabel.

“The Wizard of Oz” opened Aug. 2 at Theatre in the Park in Shawnee Mission Park. The show continues this weekend and resumes for Wed-Sat. next weekend. Showtime is 8:30. For more information check out the Theatre in the Park website.

Tags: “The Wizard of Oz” review, Theatre in the Park, Kansas City Theatre, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment, Kansas City Performing Arts