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Wicked: the Untold Story of the Witches of Oz

I can think of no better way for me to start my theater experience in London than seeing *Wicked: the Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*. I have heard so much about this show with the reviews from critics and friends, the like, but I had yet to see it. I have been anticipating seeing the show for a couple of years now, since I first heard the soundtrack. As a result, I read Gregory Maguire's book that started the whole Wicked phenomena.

Wicked, the novel, was incredibly long and detailed, and though I enjoyed it thoroughly, I wondered how this book might translate into this wildly acclaimed show. I also worried that reading the book before seeing the musical would cheapen the experience for me. I feared that the plots would be too different, and that the meaning would be lost. However, I was pleasantly surprised by Winnie Holzman and Stephen Schwartz's ability to piece together a show that both honored the book and, to some degree, *The Wizard of Oz*, the movie. Furthermore, all of the choices that were made that do not coincide with the book were intelligent and understandable adjustments.

For example, from the start of the musical version, Elphaba is a much more likeable, innocent, and naïve character than in the book. Maguire's Elphaba is born with a dim outlook on life, and I found it hard to warm to her. The musical Elphaba was a bit

more personable, allowing the audience to sympathize with her immediately. Furthermore, Madame Morrible and the Wizard did not have the strong interest in Elphaba's talents as they did in the Musical. In the novel, Elphaba grooms herself for power, and she meets with the Wizard through her own persistence, rather than at the encouragement of others. I do understand why they made this adjustment, though, because it provides for a detailed realization of the crookedness of the Wizard's system. In this way, the Wizard's regime and Elphaba's stand against it are clear. It also explains the "flying monkeys" portion of the movie, while clearing Elphaba from any wrongdoing, in the audience's opinion, at least.

The two prominent male students, Boq and Fiyero, also play very different roles in the musical than they did in Maguire's version. Boq was, indeed, pining for the affections of Galinda, yet, in the book, he was never asked to pretend to like Nessarose, which means he was never turned into the tin man. In the novel, Nessarose's strict demands as Emperor were grounded in her devout religion, rather than a love for Boq, or any man at all. In fact, Boq and Nessarose never really interact in the novel. I do, however, understand why they added this sub-plot, for it does much to further the musical's action. For example, since Galinda pushes Boq to court Nessarose, Elphaba begins to like Galinda, and she asks for her to be in the Sorcery class with Madame Morrible. In addition, Nessarose's love for Boq pushes Elphaba to bewitch the ruby red slippers, and, in turn, turn Boq into the Tin Man. (In the novel, Glinda is the one who bewitches the shoes, and the Tin Man has no connection to Elphaba at all.)

As for Fiyero, in the novel, he is never in a relationship with Glinda at all. The two of them do not have feelings for each other, for Fiyero has a wife and children

waiting for him at home. However, he does fall in love with Elphaba, only later in their lives. He is also killed as a result of his alliance with Elphaba, but he was not saved and turned to the Straw Man, as in the musical version. I believe that this choice was made to have the struggle within Elphaba because the man she loves wants another. This adds a tender musical moment with the song "I'm not that Girl," where she sings "Blithe smile, light limb/ She who's winsome, she wins him/ Gold hair with a touch of curl/ That's the girl he chose, but heaven knows/ I'm not that girl." This situation also makes it even more important and unbelievable for Elphaba when Fiyero chooses her over Glinda. When the two are united, Elphaba sings "Kiss me too fiercely/ Hold me too tight/ I need help believing you're with me tonight/ My wildest dreamings could not foresee lying beside you with you wanting me."

Another big change within the musical is the ending. Elphaba, in the novel, becomes much more disillusioned and, in correlation, much more wicked by the end of the book. She starts really committing wicked deeds, for she is an assassin working in the rebel party. This idea is somewhat alluded to in the musical's song "No Good Deed," where Elphaba claims "no good deed goes unpunished." However, the extent of her dark deeds is left pretty unclear, allowing the audience to still sympathize and side with Elphaba.

Also, Elphaba and Fiyero not dying, and, instead, running away together from Oz was a huge surprise and change from Maguire's version. In the ending of the novel, Dorothy accidentally kills Elphaba, and all of Oz rejoices her death. Her legacy is not continued by Glinda, for the two never reconnect and join forces. Glinda does mourn Elphaba some, but it is not enough to make her join the opposing side and help Elphaba's

cause. I think this ending is very important for the sake of the musical, for audiences want to leave musicals feeling uplifted and happy, thinking of the two living ‘happily ever after.’ It is good, however, that Maguire did not use this ending in the novel, for a more realistic and sobering ending in the book shows the harsh realities of how society can break down a strong spirit. We feel for Elphaba, having led a hard, cruel, and lonely life, that eventually ends in despair.

And that, I believe is the purpose of both the novel and the musical- the idea that nothing is as it seems. Young children everywhere are taught to hate the Wicked Witch of the West while watching the Wizard of Oz, but no one thinks about what motivated her to become so evil. They do not consider that the forces that are supposedly good are actually wicked, and vice versa. They do not see the other side of the story, Elphaba’s side. That is what *Wicked* teaches us, that things are not always as they seem. It shows us not to judge a book by its cover, for appearances are deceiving.

I particularly like the musical, for the way it is approached, Elphaba had the chance to be the hero of Oz. She had a chance to finally be adored by the masses, rather than shunned because of her odd skin coloration. The Wizard gave her an opportunity that she had dreamed about her whole life, as she sings about in “The Wizard and I.” However, that opportunity comes with moral sacrifices, a choice with which Elphaba, being of strong character, is not comfortable. It shows incredible strength of character and morals for her to make the choice to stand up for what is right and defy those in power, to fight for a cause. And this is a choice that Glinda cannot make, for she does not have enough gumption. Glinda, initially, would rather have fame and glory than moral integrity.

The show also brings up the point that some people are not able to be the hero. The world of Oz rejected Elphaba, though she was smart, compassionate, and morally good. Because of her odd coloration and her different ideas, she was shunned and hated, and made to look as though she were evil. One of the most poignant moments for me in the show came when she sang "For Good," her farewell duet with Glinda. Whereas Elphaba sang "unlimited, my future is unlimited" in the song "The Wizard and I," back when she was young and naïve, she sings the same notes only with the lyrics "I'm limited, just look at me, I'm limited." This moment is very tough for me, for it is sad to see how much the world has beaten down this strong, good person. Elphaba has lost all of her hope and belief in herself as a result of the harsh, critical world of Oz.

Nothing verifies the idea that nothing is as it seems than the last scene of the musical. For, in the very beginning of the musical, we see Glinda rejoicing with the people of Oz over the death of the Wicked Witch of the West. If we were to make an assumption, we might think that Glinda cared nothing for Elphaba, and that she was now ruling Oz with the same cruelty and lack of morals as the Wizard. However, after seeing the other side of the story, we know that Glinda is working for Elphaba, helping forward her cause. We see Glinda banish the Wizard, jail Madame Morrible, and continue Elphaba's legacy, and, just as she goes out to join in the people's 'rejoicing,' Glinda wipes tears from her eyes and prepares to put on another appearance.

All in all, this show was breathtaking. I was blown away by the sets, the costumes, the acting- especially Idina Menzel, the Tony-awarding winning, original Elphaba! The show has a much deeper meaning than you expect from most musicals, and it achieves its purpose clearly and directly. I think, if the show's purpose is served,

each audience member will go home and approach situations differently. People that they've shunned, made fun of, or, just simply, do not understand will possibly get a second chance. Or, at least, we will all try to understand where people are coming from more. We will try to see a bigger picture, love people for who they are, never make snap judgments, and examine a situation from all sides before we jump to any conclusions. There is a lot to be learned from Elphaba's struggle, perseverance, and difficult life, and I hope that everyone can see the show at least once.

December 30, 2006
New Ambassador's Theatre

Love Song

I truly enjoyed watching John Kolvenbach's *Love Song*, starring Neve Campbell, Michael McKean, and Cillian Murphy. Not only was it amazing to see film stars acting in person, but the play was incredibly well constructed, well conceived, and well acted. The play was also incredibly thought provoking, for it made me think about situations that I had never really considered previously.

The main situation that the play examined was the idea of real versus fake and the importance of that distinction. Beane essentially creates an imaginary girlfriend with his delusions of Molly. Molly, though she is not real, brings Beane out of his clouded depression, allowing him to be open to the world. It is as if Molly awakens Beane to the world around him, waking him to sights, sounds, tastes, and life, in general.

Furthermore, this awakening in Beane transcends to his depressed (albeit, in a very different way) sister, Joan, and her husband Harry. Suddenly, the threesome becomes alive- experiencing ideas, feelings, emotions, and fun like never before.

The revolutions in these characters are remarkable. Beane, formerly a loner, starts venturing out into the unknown world. For the first time in his life, he develops an appetite, not just for food (which he consumes eagerly and excitedly), but also for new experiences, ideas, and for sex. As for the straight-laced, closed off Joan, she begins breaking her strict rules for herself. She lets loose, has fun, and truly enjoys her husband for the first time in a long time. We see evidence of this in a very charming scene where she calls in sick to work so she can spend the day lounging around with her husband. For the first time, we see Joan and Harry enjoying life and each other. They play with their imaginations, laugh, and really communicate.

However, this newfound joy in life in these characters seems to come to a crashing halt with the realization that Molly is not real. Molly is simply an extension of Beane, a fantasy character that he has created. Upon this realization, Beane is instantly sobered, for her worries that he is not mentally stable, having created this fictional girlfriend. Surprisingly though, it is his straight-laced sister, Joan, who encourages his imagination and fantasy. She tells Beane, "It doesn't matter if she's real. I saw what she meant to you." In this scene, we also learn a great deal about Joan, and the reasons why she has become so closed off from her emotions and others (more on that later).

So, the question becomes- does it matter that Molly is not real? Does it indicate that Beane is severely disturbed, the fact that he could create such an involved relationship solely through his imagination? I think that couldn't be further from the

truth. Beane was a severely depressed man, who lacked appetite and interest for anything and anyone. He had shut himself off from the world and its possessions. He lived a solitary life without stimulation or happiness. I believe that Beane truly hit rock bottom right before he created Molly.

In my own personal experiences, I have seen that it sometimes when you hit rock bottom, the lowest of the low, the most depressed, is when you find a new way out. Sometimes it takes the most desperate of situations to envelop you into a state of utter despair, and, from that state, you can create a new plan, a new way of approaching the situation. I think that Beane's utter desperation caused him to create in his mind the person that could help him out of it. He knew that he could not get the help he needed from his sister or Harry, so he found or, better, conceived the person that could save him. After all, Molly is a part of Beane; she is an extension of Beane, a creation of Beane. She is inside of Beane. Therefore, the courage and strength was inside of Beane all along. I think of that as survival.

Survival is being able to save oneself when there seems no way out. Survival is providing yourself with the tools that you need to live, to make it in the world. Survival in this situation is the creation of motivation. Beane created Molly to motivate himself to find the joys in life that he had lost, or possibly never had.

I know that we tossed around the idea in class that Beane could be schizophrenic. I do not think this could be further from the truth. Speaking from experience, for I have a close uncle who suffers from this disorder, and it is an incompassitating, unrelenting series of delusions that serve to hinder the afflicted individual from truly experiencing the

world. Molly does just the opposite of schizophrenia for Beane, for she encourages him experience the world, to see the world in another light.

I would also like to discuss two important scenes in the play that relate to each other, in my opinion. First, was the scene where Joan expresses why she shut herself off from the world. She speaks of her heartache when she was dumped as a teenager. She talks of how the incident completely destroyed her, how she was dissolved to nothing because of her emotions. She tells Beane that at that moment, witnessing her pitiful desperation, she decided to never again let herself be made a fool of by emotions. Suddenly, we understand why Joan has been so closed off and distanced from others throughout the play. We see why she has put up walls around herself, not allowing any emotions to break through. We understand why she has so many problems relating to her “incompetent” interns, her colleagues, and her husband.

In contrast to this, the last scene, where Beane decides to venture out into the world, without Molly, shows a very different approach to life. In this scene, Beane tells Molly that she has awakened him to the world- its sights, its sounds, its feelings- and he wants to go out to experience more. He says he cannot turn off this desire, now that it has been realized. Though he says he doesn't know who he is without her, he wants to find out. Molly is, at first, hesitant to see him go, for she wants to keep him for herself. However, she realizes that Beane is actually being quite brave to open himself to the world.

As the door opens, and the outside world floods in, the play ends with a somewhat ambiguous feeling. However, I think this is the perfect ending for a play of this nature. Those who are open to the world open their front door each day, not knowing exactly

what the day will hold. They do not know if they will experience joy or pain, but they are ready for whatever may come their way. Beane has made this choice, the opposite choice that Joan made as a teenager, for he has opened himself up, come what may. He has decided he would rather see what the world might have to offer, than never truly know. Furthermore, he knows Molly will be waiting for him if he does need her later. This play says so much about life, fear, and willingness. It was incredibly touching and moving, and I think we can learn a lot from it.