



'The Wiz' at The Creative and Performing Arts Center at The Hylton Performing Arts Center

By Michael Poandl on May 25, 2014



Since Judy Garland first went over the technicolor rainbow in 1939, audiences across America have been captivated by the story of Dorothy, Munchinland, and the Wicked Witch of the West. The story of *The Wizard of Oz* has imprinted itself so deeply on America's cultural consciousness, one might be tempted to ask, "How could it possibly get any better?"

With sequins and polyester, of course.

And you'll find a lot of it in [The Creative and Performing Arts Center's](#) exuberant production of *the Wiz*, playing through today at the Hylton Performing Arts Center. In addition to the aforementioned classic 70's textile, CAPAC's *The Wiz* has captured the dynamic energy and uplifting spirit of the production that was immortally captured by Diana Ross and Michael Jackson in the 1978 film version of the Broadway show.

Besides some minor literary differences between *The Wiz* and *The Wizard of Oz* (Dorothy has silver rather than ruby slippers, and is helped by the Good Witch Glinda and the Good Witch Addaperle), what is truly unique about *The Wiz* is that it places Frank L. Baum's original tale in a modern, funky context. The denizens of the Emerald City are posh urbanites who just want "to be seen", Evillene's minions are oppressed factory workers, and The Wiz himself (Rayshun Lamar) has the aura of a fiery Baptist preacher. Taken together, *The Wiz* breathes new life into an old story, and reminds audiences of the power of friendship and believing in yourself.



We all know the story of *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy (Kanysha Williams), a young girl who feels out of place on her Kansas farm, gets whisked away by a tornado into the land of Oz, where she (and her house) promptly do away with the Wicked Witch of the East. Desperate to get back to her Auntie Em and Uncle Henry, Dorothy makes her way to the Emerald City to entreat the Great and Powerful Wiz for his help. Along the way, she meets a Scarecrow (Brandon Showell) who wants a brain, a Tin Man (Devyn Tinker) who longs for a heart, and a Lion (Roy Patten Jr.) in desperate need of some courage. The Wiz agrees to help the motley foursome, with the condition that they must first kill Evillene (Shelby Sykes), the Wicked Witch of the West. Finally, although the Wiz turns out to be a very human fraud with a bag of elaborate tricks, Dorothy manages to get home with the help of her magic slippers.

The glue that holds the show together is the score by Charlie Small. This is even more true of *The Wiz* than in most musicals, and I'm happy to say that the entire ensemble, guided by Music Director Angela Somers, delivered spectacularly. Every voice in the cast was impressive, from the lead roles down to the smallest Munchkin. Every time the music started up for a new song, I got excited because I knew I was in for a fresh experience. Of course, the funky vocals were complimented by the wonderfully engaging choreography by Kay Harris and Kyrai L. Martin. I was impressed by how the dancing was tailored to fit the ages and abilities of the various ensembles, which ranged in age from small children to teens and adults. Those dancers who had more gymnastic ability showed it off, and those who didn't still captivated the audience with their enthusiasm and their stage presence.

Although the entire ensemble was wonderful, these three were my favorites: From the second he roared on to the stage, the Cowardly Lion (Roy Patten Jr.) had the audience eating out of the palm of his paw, I had to remind myself that the top of his mane was, in fact, an exuberant

blonde Afro. Aside from his highly theatrical hair, Mr. Patten nailed the essence of the grandstanding but terribly insecure Lion. His wide vocal range easily accommodated the challenging music, and his fourth-wall-breaking asides had the audience in stitches especially during his song “I’m a Mean Ole Lion.”

Kanysha Williams’ incredible acting and singing (as Dorothy) culminated in a spine-tingling rendition of “Home,” which received a well-deserved ovation from the appreciative audience.

And then there was the Wiz himself (Rayshun Lamar), a gold-clad, shamelessly shallow dynamo. I do believe Mr. Lamar made me find religion Saturday night, and it was all due to his unbelievable energy and astounding vocal ability, as heard in “So You Wanted to Meet the Wizard” and “Believe in Yourself.” Charlie Small’s score for *The Wiz* includes a mixture of jazz, gospel, and more traditional musical theatre styles, and Mr. Lamar transitioned between those styles seamlessly. I’m quite sure I will be humming these songs for weeks, and that means the cast did their jobs.

I credit Director Chaz D. Pando, for executing a hugely complex production that involved a cast of 43 actors, including small children and a live dog. The production was big, flashy, and funky, but it never felt overwhelming or overwrought. Mr. Pando made the choice to utilize large projections throughout the show as a way to establish the environment. By doing this, he was able to eliminate the need for a large physical set, thus giving the actors the space they needed to sing and dance and run around. I appreciated that aside from the projections and the lights, the main set pieces of the show were the actors themselves. The tornado, the yellow brick road and the sleep-inducing-poppies were all communicated by dancers. The actors bodies became the canvas that Mr. Pando used to tell his story, and really, isn’t that what live theatre is all about?



The leads of 'The Wiz' with the Costume Design Team. Photo courtesy of CAPAC.

Of course, what was on the actors' bodies was quite impressive too. The costumes, designed by Rameja Thompson, were the most impressive and professional I have seen in the on a local stage. They were practically sculptures, an astounding mélange of fabric and found objects that somehow held together despite the highly kinetic dancing in the show. The Tin Man was not just in a silver painted jumpsuit. Oh no – he was pasted with calculators and half-broken cash registers, connected with wires and completely coated with carefully arranged garbage. This same Dadaist, collage-style costuming was utilized for the Good Witch Addaperle and the Wicked Witch Evillene. The unique costume design, engaging in its own right, also captures the essence of *The Wiz* itself. Crowded, bursting with energy, urban and chic at the same time, the costumes and the show were beautiful.

I applaud the cast and crew of *The Wiz* for pulling off what is clearly an exhausting show with bottomless energy, and I urge everyone to “ease on down the road” today at 3 PM to catch the final performance.

Running Time: Three hours, with one 15-minute intermission.



The Wiz plays its final performance today, May 25th at 3 PM at The Creative and Performing Arts Center performing at The Hylton Performing Arts Center-10960 George Mason Circle, in Manassas, VA. For tickets, purchase them [online](#). For future events at The Hylton Performance Arts Center, go to their [performance calendar](#).

LINK

The Creative and Performing Arts Center's (CAPAC) [website](#).



About Michael Poandl

Michael Poandl graduated American University as a Theatre: Performance major in 2013. He is currently an intern in the Grants Department at the Arts Council of Fairfax County.

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2 Responses to *'The Wiz' at The Creative and Performing Arts Center at The Hylton Performing Arts Center*

1.



Diane May 25, 2014 at 12:35 pm #

What a terrific show! The singers could belt and croon. The costumes were hysterical and very detailed — the good witch of the north was a bag lady, literally. You wanted to cuddle the lion and not get too close to the wicked witch of the west. Even the littlest 4-year-old extra was a delight to watch. Some of my favorite characters were the 4 dancers who played the yellow-brick road. Now that's how you get an audience "Movin"!

2.



Alexis May 27, 2014 at 11:16 pm #

Thank you for the great review Michael! I'm glad you enjoyed our show. It was hard work but we enjoyed every minute!

Regards,

Alexis Smith aka "Addaperle the Feel Good Girl!"