

A History of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz Before the 1939 Film

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Mark Evan Swartz. *Oz Before the Rainbow: L. Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz on Stage and Screen to 1939*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xii + 291 pages. \$34.95.

This scholarly book is an exquisitely written treasure for Oz lovers, and a useful resource for scholars of the history of musical comedy and silent movies. Mark Evan Swartz offers a comprehensive look at the life of L. Frank Baum and how he developed the concepts for his 1900 book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Swartz chronicles how Baum's book was transformed into one of the biggest hits in American theatre. In this book Swartz makes compelling the obscure details about the business dealings that accompanied the productions. Although there are many works on Oz, this one distinguishes itself as the most comprehensive research on the history of the work before the famous 1939 film. In addition, rhetorical scholars may find Swartz's approach one to emulate because of its historical perspective. The most impressive aspect of this book, and the real payoff for readers, is the magnificently rich detail that Swartz offers. Elements of the Oz works that may escape a reader's notice are displayed for the reader in an engaging way. Swartz gives an impressive review of Oz literature that includes the multitude of interpretations of the book. Those interpretations include understanding the book as mythology, folk tale, myth of female heroism, and also as a spiritual and mystical experience. Other analyses of the work have identified themes of psychology, the American frontier, political and social symbolism, and ethnicity. Some scholars have taken semiotic approaches to the work. Swartz hypothesizes that if Baum could have

predicted the many interpretations of the book, he would have realized that his novel's success would change his life forever.

In addition to excellent writing and vast detail, the book offers an intriguing pictorial both in black and white and full color that gives the reader a look at stage productions, actors, stage and film posters, advertisements and even costume sketches.

The book is divided into two parts: Part 1 includes five chapters that chronicle Oz as a stage musical. Part 2 offers an understanding of how Oz unfolded through silent films.

In chapter 1, the reader learns how the character of Dorothy was changed from a little girl into a teenager as the story was developed for the stage. The addition of music and dance turned the book into a comic opera with lavish costumes and sets. The end result was the show that premiered at Chicago's Grand Opera House in June of 1902, called *The Wizard of Oz* — a play that dramatically differed from L. Frank Baum's original book.

Chapter 2 describes the script for the Chicago opening of *The Wizard of Oz*. Swartz takes readers through the many changes that were made to Baum's original novel. In this version, Dorothy has a pet cow, Imogene, and the characters of Tryxie Tryle, Wiley Gyle, and Niccolo Chopper become part of the story. These pun-filled names, along with Dorothy's last name, Gale, were director Julian Mitchell's trademark. The silver slippers that Dorothy receives from the dead witch in the original book are replaced with a magic wishing ring that contains the power Dorothy needs to get back home. Also in Mitchell's story, political intrigue and lust for power became important themes. Baum was at peace with the changes that Mitchell made, even though he did not like all of them. The Chicago production was a huge hit with critics and the public, even though Swartz describes the plot as a crazy hodge podge.

Chapter 3 describes the pre-opening publicity of the Chicago premiere, masterminded by Townsend Walsh. In this chapter, elaborate costumes and scenery are described in great depth. Also reported is the tremendous financial success of the Chicago premiere and Midwest tour. Fascinating to read is how the children's novel was transformed into a stage production that became a sellout in the post-Chicago, pre-New York tour of the Midwest.

In Chapter 4, the reader learns of the massive publicity campaign that preceded the New York City debut of 1903. After the show's opening, the critics were divided. Even so, when the show ended its run on October 3, 1903, it was the longest running musical of the season. The unprecedented success of *The Wizard of Oz* stage production spurred the production of *Babes in Toyland*, which featured similar theatrical devices and proved to be an enormous success.

Over the course of the next several years, as vast numbers of people across the country had an opportunity to attend the play, it became further engrained in the public consciousness. In February of 1904 the first company came back to the Majestic Theatre in New York. It was a tremendous hit all over again. The production continued to change and revitalize itself; twice during the 1905-1906 season the first company returned to New York City with great success.

The first films based on the novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* were initiated by the author himself. The fairy-tale films featured Baum as an on-stage narrator illustrating his talk with both films and slides. The evening's program was divided into two sections, *The Land of Oz* and one of Baum's non-Oz books, *John Dough and the Cherub*. The show was expensive to produce, and even though in most locations attendance was good, Baum was unable to fully pay his bills for producing the show.

Chapter 7 tells of the 1910 Selig Polyscope Company of Chicago production of a film version, titled *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Key elements from Baum's original novel appear in the film, but there is no Good Witch of the North, nor do the Munchkins appear. Furthermore, Dorothy does not obtain magical shoes or encounter a deadly poppy field. Most importantly, the film does not express the idea that Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion journey to the Wizard to find home, brains, a heart, and courage. Although the Selig films of 1908 and 1910 did not achieve as much success as had been hoped, Baum, still was excited by the new medium of motion pictures and he was driven to produce additional films under the name of the Oz Film Manufacturing Company.

The death of L. Frank Baum in 1919 was not the death of his works. His publisher, the Reilly and Lee Company, arranged with Maud Baum, the author's widow, to hire a new writer to continue the Oz series. L. Frank Baum's son, Frank Joslyn Baum, had permission to sell film and other rights to the original

Oz stories. He almost made a deal with Metro Goldwyn Mayer, but instead Larry Semon, who went to work for Chadwick Films, created the film version. On February 7, 1925, the film debuted at the Forum Theatre in Los Angeles. It had a successful run in New York and then went out as a road show, complete with a special prologue.

Most critics were favorable toward the 1925 Larry Semon film version of *The Wizard of Oz*, and it was reported that both youngsters and adults found the film entertaining. Even the few critics who disparaged the film for its deviations from Baum's original book noted that the slapstick comedy was exceptionally good. The film was distributed in the United States and overseas. Even with the success of this film, Frank J. Baum was not ready to give up on the idea of a feature-length musical film and he begun negotiations for another film based on his father's book. It became a film that changed Oz history forever.

In the epilogue of the book, Swartz tells the story of how the MGM Technicolor, feature length film, *The Wizard of Oz*, came to be made in 1939. Casting, setting, and musical considerations are discussed in great detail, and Swartz tells of the influence of the film on popular culture.

This book is as delightful to read as the 1939 film is to watch and like others who return again and again to the film, I imagine readers will delight again and again in this book. The work is an important contribution to the study of Oz and film history. In particular scholars will love the book for its vast detail and engagingly well written text. Those aspiring to write well and especially scholars of theatre and film will find this book a treasured encounter, most notably for its comprehensive detail.

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