

Effects make live 'Wizard' a horse of a different color

Plastic light sabres, cotton candy and the Cowardly Lion created a circus-like atmosphere for the "The Wizard of Oz Live" this weekend. However, the show's true stars were backstage, expertly orchestrating the unique special effects.

The Wicked Witch of the West flew down with her army of monkeys, while Glenda, the Good Witch of the North, glided down from the sky on a star. The snowflakes (trapeze artists) gently fell from above, and the yellow brick road seemed to move in sync with its travelers.

Some of the most mesmerizing and memorable special effects occurred during the tornado scene. The sound of the winds and the flashing lights helped to fill in the details of an imagined cyclone.

Little imagination was needed, however, to grasp the upheaval of the farmhouse, which was actually lifted 40 feet into the air. Because the house was constructed of a translucent material, the audience could see a terrified Dorothy sitting straight up in her bed as an hourglass-shaped track moved the house around the set, twirling it about in the air.

Director Michel Grilikhes and scenic designer Stephen Ehlers deserve much of the credit for conceiving such scenes. Without the accompanying special effects, the show would have surely been a failure.

Intended to mirror the 1939 film classic in every possible way, "The Wizard of Oz Live" depended on these effects to create the sensation of watching a fairy tale take place before the audience's eyes.

Elaborate sets and costumes greatly enhanced the show. Scenery included munchkin huts, the Wicked Witch's castle and the gigantic, menacing, moving head of the Wizard of Oz.

The imaginative costumes, created by Bill Campbell, ranged from being clown-like to exotic, and those of the Oz dwellers were always wild and colorful. The snowflakes looked like Christmas tree ornaments as they donned glitter and glowing lights. Even just one flower costume from

Jessica Yates Theater

the bed of poppies had more ruffles than the entire display of the Sears curtain section. And Glenda made Cinderella look underdressed.

The vividness of the costumes and scenery was essential for holding the audience's attention — even most of the children were already familiar with the story line. Families didn't come just to see another version of "The Wizard of Oz." They came to see something new, exciting and entertaining.

Children were spellbound by the "impossibilities" they witnessed. Adults realized the role that cables and computers played in the production but were fascinated nonetheless.

Yet we shouldn't ignore the actors' individual performances. Their work was of professional quality in general, but, as is inevitable with any show staged in an arena, was less than memorable.

Grace Greig, who played Dorothy, did a good job of using exaggerated head and body movements to convey her character's childish nature. The 23-year-old seemed very talented and dedicated to her role, but of course, she paled in comparison to Judy Garland.

The Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion were played by Joe McDorough, Joe Giuffre and Guy Allen, respectively. All three actors were unimpressive in their roles and probably have had more training and experience in dancing than in acting. Clearly, character development was simply not a priority for them.

Every sound in the production, including all lines and songs, came from a pre-recorded tape. This contributed to the distant relationship, both literally and figuratively, between the audience and the characters. However, microphones would have been impractical and unamplified speaking would have been ineffective, so a taped audio performance was necessary.

The biggest problem with "The Wizard of Oz Live" lay in its intention

to imitate the movie. During the first act, the corresponding detail between the two was amazing. One could imagine the director going through the film, frame by frame, attempting to create a nearly identical moment on stage for each image.

The audience grew to expect this conformity. Therefore, any deviation from their anticipation brought disappointment. It was annoying that Grilikhes kept lines, such as "Well, that's a horse of a different color," and then left the colored horses out of the show, or when a reference was made to the Wicked Witch's sign in the sky, "Surrender Dorothy," when there was, in fact, no sign.

Another problem was that the movie is more than three hours long, but the stage production was cut to about two hours, causing some scenes to be modified or deleted. The scene in which Dorothy is captured and imprisoned in the Wicked Witch's castle was drastically simplified.

This particular scene in the film is incredibly suspenseful with the audience waiting anxiously on the edge of their seats to see if their dear Dorothy would be rescued by her fearless friends. The audience of "The Wizard of Oz Live" saw only a rather uninteresting chase scene and a hurried execution of the witch.

A jazzed-up version of "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead" immediately followed, but without the dramatic qualities. Concentration on the singing and dancing while undermining the individual characters prevailed here and throughout the show. Consequently, the production wasn't comparable to the film classic.

But it did succeed in recalling some pleasant memories. While the show was definitely geared toward the kids (the "Get Your Picture Taken with the Cowardly Lion" photo opportu-



Dorothy and the Tin Man in 'The Wizard of Oz Live' Thursday night at the Smith Center

ity proved that), not just the kids could enjoy it. Even as the children sang along with the familiar tunes, many adults who fondly remembered seeing the movie in their childhood were humming along too.

'Charlie Brown' cast offers energetic fun

Jacki Greenberg Theater

But even in comic strips the punchlines are not always funny, and the same held true for some of the scenes in the play. Overall, though, the actors were very expressive and the scenes very funny.

Senior Ian Williams, a newcomer to the Lab, was excellent as Charlie Brown. His "feel sorry for me" attitude was effective, and the audience couldn't help but sympathize with him. Though Charlie Brown is the least charismatic and enthusiastic of the Peanuts characters, Williams made him the most sincere and believable.

Sophomore Alison Michel was also outstanding. Her naturally brassy voice was perfect for the bossy, crabby character of Lucy, and she was particularly good when flirting with Schroeder (Billy Crudup) or teasing Linus (Paul Goodson).

As the mini-Beethoven, Crudup was a bit of a ham and sometimes related to the audience as if he were a stand-up comedian instead of Schroeder. He was charming nonetheless — especially in the song in which he compared the story of "Peter Rabbit" to "Robin Hood."

Goodson captured the true spirit of Linus, as he clung to a blue security blanket and sucked his thumb throughout the show.

As the simple-minded Sally, sophomore Gretchen Case was a little too simple. Her wide-eyed expressions were appropriate for the innocent, jump-roping girl, but Case had little character development and was often difficult to hear.

As Snoopy, senior Andrew Lawler actually had two roles to play: The Snoopy who acts like a dog and the Snoopy who talks to the audience like



Ian Williams plays Charlie Brown and Alison Michel plays Lucy

a person. Lawler was funniest when he was chasing rabbits, howling or barking, but he acted like himself when he wasn't doing doglike things. "Suppertime," Snoopy's big number, could have been the show-stopper, but it wasn't.

Although none of the actors had exceptional singing voices, the group musical numbers highlighted the show. Their enthusiasm and unity compensated for the missed notes.

And if children are truly the toughest critics, the Lab has a winner on its hands. As soon as the show ended, the 7-year-old in the first row said, "Mommy, I want to watch it again!"

You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown will be presented today at 4 p.m. and 8 p.m., and Tuesday at 5 p.m. in Graham Memorial. Admission is free.

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If peanut butter sticks to the roof of your mouth when you're eating a peanut butter sandwich, it means you're really lonely.

At least that's what Charlie Brown says. And who knows the meaning of lonely better than he does?

"You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," which opened Sunday at the Lab Theatre, is an hour of sheer fun — there's no better way to describe it. The play has no plot. It's just a bunch of kids having a good time, and it really is a pleasure to watch.

The fact that there isn't a running storyline is precisely what makes the play so charming. It's like taking a trip back to childhood and experiencing life as seen through the eyes of the Peanuts gang.

Director Amy Rosenberg and set designer Fabiana Politi have created a bright, lively production from beginning to end.

Music sets a cheerful mood before the play begins. Schoolhouse Rock songs such as "I'm Just a Bill" and "Conjunction Junction — What's Your Function?" bring back memories of Saturday morning cartoons.

The set consists of blocks and a bench, all in red, yellow and blue. The stage floor is covered with graffiti — tic-tac-toe games, handprints, footprints and the names of the Peanuts characters.

The production came to life in the first musical number — a rousing rendition of the song "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown." Complete with baton twirling and tambourine playing, the song was full of the spirit and spontaneity that continued throughout the show.

The production was well-paced, and before the audience had a chance to wonder "What next?" the next scene was in progress. In the tradition of a comic strip, brief interaction between a few characters was generally followed by a cute and clever punline.

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